
Eons ago, at the edge of the universe...

SPACEBREAKER

It is a time of unrest. Operating from their secret lair, radical Activists have been harassing the valiant peacekeepers of the Incorporated Planets.

During a recent sneak attack Activists stole proprietary data concerning a new IP technology called the DEFENSE STAR, a bleeding-edge consumer platform with enough high-end functionality to penetrate any market.

Fleeing the forces of justice, Activist double agent Princess Kia speeds toward planet Tanix aboard her spaceship, carrying information that can destroy the IP, kill freedom and plunge the galaxy into chaos.....

CHAPTER ONE

1

Tanix lay near the ass end of the galaxy. It had always been a desert planet but there was a time when it was prosperous and more densely populated. Tanix went to shit not long after all its hydrocarbons had been extracted and sold to the highest bidder. Studies indicated that there might be a correlation between the two events, but researchers were reluctant to claim causality. Further studies might have helped, but when the planet lost its primary source of revenue, the Department of Social Sciences was one of the first to have its funding eliminated.

Kriv economists, citing indicators and historical data, attributed the planet's economic downturn to insufficient spending. Vrek economists, citing their own numbers, argued that *excessive* spending was the culprit. The planet's population, what was left of it, couldn't decide which group of economists to believe.

Every other solar cycle¹ Tanixians got fed up with the leaders they had elected and replaced them with officials of the opposite bent. This kept everybody more or less equally unhappy. And it helped maintain Tanix's status as a galactic afterthought, a cosmic dead end, the neglected third cousin twice removed of the Incorporated Planets. But all that was about to change.

2

Rapidly approaching the planet, under considerable duress, was the Activist assault ship *Regulator*.

¹ Defined as the time it took planet Crystor, the seat of government, to revolve around its sun.

Like a well-meaning federal government it² had begun its life as a small, streamlined vessel, only to have its role expand steadily over time. Rather than build a new ship in response to the changes, the Activists had chosen to add modules to *Regulator*. The result was a bloated, ungainly mess. Its first crew had numbered 100; now there were more than 10,000 personnel aboard. And that didn't even include the many androids also in service.

Of all the additions that had been made to *Regulator*, none increased the power of its engines. That was why the ship could not outrun its pursuer, the IP space defender *Exceptionalist*.

Regulator's only hope, then, was to outgun the other ship. But *Exceptionalist* was winning that battle as well.

Her many state-of-the-art laser cannons had been pummeling the Activist vessel for several minutes, knocking out its weapons and weakening its shields. Soon *Regulator* would be defenseless.

3

Princess Kia Sedana pondered this from her command post on the ship's bridge.

Young and beautiful, clad in a gray uniform that managed to be elegant and practical, Kia ignored the cannon blasts buffeting *Regulator*. Her Activist comrades were set apart both by their black uniforms and their collective cringing nervousness under fire. Kia noted their discomfort and pitied them.

For a moment.

"Why the hell have we stopped shooting?" she demanded.

² At first the Activists had observed galactic custom by referring to their space ships as "her" and "she." But after strident protests by the nonbinary gender faction, it was decided that the only acceptable pronoun was "it."

"Our guns have been destroyed, Madam Princess," replied the ship's captain.

"All of them?!"

"We didn't have that many to start with," the captain said, averting his eyes.

Kia willed the man to look at her. "In the middle of a galaxy-wide uprising," she said with cold fury, "the flagship of our entire fleet, which is carrying out the most important mission in the history of Activism...doesn't have enough firepower? How did *that* happen?"

The captain squared his shoulders and attempted eye contact, preserving a sliver of dignity. "We requisitioned additional cannon, Ma'am," he explained. "But there were delays."

"Delays?!"

"Background checks, Ma'am."

"But they aren't legally required."

"True," the captain said, his confidence level inching upward. "But we commissioned our own checks. To show how serious we are about the importance of controlling weapons sales. And the checks took a lot longer than we expected."

"Well, the reasoning was sound," Kia said grimly, "but the timing sure sucked."

A tremendous blast shook the entire ship, knocking everyone on the bridge off their feet. The lights went out and all systems crashed. A second later the emergency lights came on and the ship regained minimal functionality.

"The defense shields," announced a computer voice, "are down. The defense shields...are down."

"Why does it put the little pauses in there?" Kia complained, as she pulled herself off the deck. "Captain!"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Presume we're about to be boarded and prepare accordingly."

"Yes, Ma'am. Should I prepare an escape vehicle for you?"

"Too late for that," Kia said, hurrying off the bridge. "I need to find an android."

CHAPTER TWO

1

Having crippled *Regulator's* engines, *Exceptionalist* easily overtook the larger ship and positioned herself above it. Given the helter-skelter manner in which modules had been grafted onto *Regulator* over time, there was only one section of its hull on which a ship *Exceptionalist's* size could touch down. That section was all the way aft, above the engine housings. The IP ship would fit in almost as snugly as a puzzle piece.

Thus with great care did the space defender lower herself onto the unwelcoming Activist vessel. It was like watching a rhino mount an elephant. But a lot noisier.

2

"Now what?" asked 88-XOR hopelessly, in response to the awful grinding sound that seemed to be coming from everywhere all at once, rattling his circuits and loosening his fasteners.

Insofar as any android could feel hopeless, depressed, defeated, nervous, and so on -- which this one could; his³ code was reasonably sophisticated -- Eighty-eight had experienced all those states of mind over the past half-hour.

"We'll probably be destroyed," he fretted, making his way down a corridor in search of his friend Lita. It was all too like her to disappear during a time of crisis, when he most needed her. Not that he'd ever admit to the needing part.

³ The nonbinary gender faction had tried to effect changes in android pronouns as well. But the androids weren't having that shit.

Eighty-eight was a simple translator bot with humanoid features. His casing had a rich ebony sheen. His read-only memory contained information regarding a time when androids existed solely at the whim of whomever built and programmed them.

Eighty-eight had come along after all that, for which he was eternally grateful. On the other hand, there had never been a time during his utilization cycle when hadn't served at the whim of whomever employed him. The differences between the two arrangements were sometimes hard to grok.

"I'm not even supposed to be on this ship," the android muttered, to no one but himself.

Which was just as well, because no one else could have heard him over that grating, crunching carbon-nanofiber-on-carbon-nanofiber sound.

Typically when something unpleasant happened to Eighty-eight, it was Lita's fault. It was certainly true in this case. Lita had insisted they offer their services to the crew of *Regulator*, and she had also withheld key bits of information about what it entailed. Only when it was far too late had Eighty-eight learned that:

- a) *Regulator* was an Activist ship carrying something that had been stolen from the Incorporated Planets;
- b) The IP would stop at nothing to get the stolen item back;
- c) *Regulator's* crew were expected to sacrifice their lives for this mission;
- d) Androids were considered to be part of the crew.

The rest, you might say, was just logic. Merciless and immutable.

And now he couldn't even find Lita, so he had no one to commiserate with. Meanwhile this interminable grinding sound--

Wait. What sound?

"It stopped," 88-XOR said, startling himself with the volume of his voice in the newfound silence. "It stopped," he said again, warming up to the idea. Finally, a break in the gloom! Something going right for a change!

Several crew members entered the corridor at a jog, moving in loose formation. Their expressions were stern. They paid the android no mind, but he took no offense.

"The noise stopped!" he exclaimed happily to the passers-by. "What a relief!"

The straggler of the bunch didn't stop running, but he turned to tell Eighty-eight, "It means we're about to be boarded." Then he hurried to catch up to his comrades.

Eighty-eight watched them disappear down the corridor.

"Well, shit," he said.

3

If the people he'd just seen were heading into battle, Eighty-eight thought, it only made sense for an unarmed, peace-loving, conscientious-objecting, non-combatant such as himself to go the opposite direction. And to hope Lita was thinking along the same lines.

At the end of the corridor Eighty-eight encountered a bigger group of crew members, moving faster than the first squadron and carrying weapons. They were going left, so the android went right.

Two turns after that he spotted Lita.

"Oh thank god," Eighty-eight said. A silly thing for an android to say, but he'd been programmed by humans, after all, and some of them still practiced religion.

"Lita!" Eighty-eight called, but his friend had already disappeared around another corner. She seemed very intent on getting somewhere as quickly as her stubby brown legs would take her.

"Where are you going?" Eighty-eight said, knowing she wouldn't hear him. It was borderline rude the way she hadn't even turned her head at the sound of his voice. That was Lita, though. She lacked the subroutine for social graces.

He started after her but he was forced to stop when the ceiling of the corridor collapsed in front of him, and down through the resultant hole dropped a fully armored and heavily armed peacekeeper of the IP.

"Oh my," the android said.

"Easy," the peacekeeper said. "You're in no danger."

Then a laser bolt gouged a giant hole in his chest and the peacekeeper died extravagantly.

"Good lord!" Eighty-eight cried. No sooner had he turned in the direction of the blast than did he see the shooter, an Activist soldier, taking aim at him.

"I surrender!" the android said, panic overriding logic.

"Out of the way!" the soldier snarled. "They're coming!"

"Who?"

The answer, it turned out, had two parts. The first was: More Activist soldiers, all of whom took up firing stances and trained their weapons on the hole in the ceiling. The second part was: more IP peacekeepers, who dropped out of said hole in copious numbers.

All at once Eighty-eight was in the middle of a firefight. He screamed, ducked for cover and ran, with all the speed and grace of a knight on ice skates.

CHAPTER THREE

1

The battle the android so narrowly escaped was emblematic of skirmishes in at least a dozen other parts of the ship. Squadrons had breached *Regulator's* hull with one of the IP's newest technologies: the Provisional Air Lock. It had been developed by defense contractor Cereniti Ventures in response to a particularly nasty problem the IP was facing during its fight against Activism.

Although the struggle was playing out like a bona fide war, the peacekeepers of the IP had been tasked with keeping casualties to a minimum. They had every right to defend themselves, of course. But their mandate with regard to the opposition (who were never to be called "the enemy"; that was too negative) was to use killing only as a last resort. Capture was greatly preferred. It was morally correct, good for public relations, and most importantly cost efficient. Captured Activists could be assigned to the workforces of various manufacturers. The businesses received inexpensive labor -- there was a special "treason rate" significantly lower than the minimum wage -- and the IP received a transfer fee for each worker delivered. The fees helped offset the cost of fighting the war.

By contrast, dealing with dead Activists was an economic and logistical nightmare. Laser rifles, ion grenades and other tools of contemporary warfare tended to reduce their targets to lots and lots of very small pieces. Identifying these pieces as the humans they had once been was time-consuming, impractical and expensive.

But the work had to be done, because despite the Activists' stated intention of destroying the IP, they were still stakeholders. They had rights under the end user license agreement.⁴

Thus the mandate, and thus the importance of PALs.

Before the Provisional Air Lock was perfected, peacekeepers attempting to board an Activist vessel had to go through the established air locks. When they did, the opposition was waiting for them, heavily armed and under no restrictions with regard to killing. The outcomes of these encounters were less than optimal. The forces of peace prevailed, but only because of their superior numbers, and only at great cost. Something had to be done before the IP's Acceptable Loss Per Outlay (ALPO) limit was exceeded, triggering committee meetings and stakeholder outcry.

And the something was the PAL. It permitted peacekeepers to be inserted in any part of an Activist ship at any time, preserving the element of surprise and minimizing casualties.

The PAL was critical to the war effort. Cereniti's stock was trading at record highs. The company's leaders were ecstatic.

They were happy about the whole saving-lives bit too.

2

The battle Eighty-eight escaped led him right into the middle of another one. Approaching an intersection of corridors he was nearly trampled by a small group of Activist soldiers running by with weapons drawn. Turning the corner to head in the opposite direction, the android found himself about to be run down by a group of peacekeepers.

"Heavens!" he cried, in full retreat.

⁴ Although most of them weren't aware of those rights, because they hadn't read the agreement. Just like most people don't read footnotes.

Meanwhile the Activists had stopped running. They'd turned back toward their pursuers and opened fire, and the peacekeepers had responded in kind. The corridor was filled with brilliantly colored bolts of energy, each making a tell-tale *zzzzinggg* sound as it hurtled toward its target. Explosions rocked the walls and ceiling and screams rang out as laser bolts found their marks.

What had, just seconds ago, been empty space in front of Eighty-eight was now what someone in a different time and place would have called no man's land. Or a kill zone.

Eighty-eight turned to go back the way he'd come, only to see more peacekeepers coming from that direction.

"Whatever can I do?" he wailed.

At times such as this it was useful to be an android. For while Eighty-eight was behaving, outwardly, like a panicky human -- in keeping with his programming -- his CPU, which trafficked only in logic, had already determined what he must do.

And then he did it. He blundered right into the kill zone, staggering his way across no man's land, screaming the whole time, and then he stumble-stepped into the next part of the corridor, which was mercifully devoid of warlike activity. And he barely got scorched. The only mark on his chassis was a long laser burn on one arm, where a bolt had skimmed the metallic surface.

"How awful!" Eighty-eight commented on the blemish. "I look like some kind of vagrant!"

(Apparently whomever coded this android thought mincing was the height of humor.)

Eighty-eight hurried down the hall, still looking for Lita.

Behind him, the skirmish played itself out in a matter of minutes. The peacekeepers shot to stun, the Activists to kill.

Fortunately for the peacekeepers, most Activist soldiers had lousy aim. They were young and inexperienced in combat. Until very recently many had never fired weapons before. They had been staunch supporters of galactic anti-gun regulations. Now, having been pressed into military service, they were learning the hard way. Friendly fire accounted for 90% of Activist combat deaths. On the bright side, the number had come down 8% in the past solar cycle.

The peacekeepers had no such problem. They were expertly trained in the humane use of laser weapons. They didn't shoot anyone in the head, the heart or the groin unless they really had to. And even then they felt terrible about it.

After the second group of peacekeepers entered the fray the Activists were quickly overwhelmed. Those who didn't get stunned fled. Those who did get stunned were put in restraints and transferred to *Exceptionalist*.

But not right away. The prisoners were moved off to the sides of the corridor. A hush fell over the peacekeepers. Something big was imminent, and they prepared for it gravely. They cleaned themselves up as best they could. They holstered their weapons. They lined themselves up near the PAL and stood at attention and waited.

"Look sharp," their commander said gruffly.

The airlock opened with a hiss and out of it dropped Brace Pulsar. President of the IP. Second most powerful man in the free galaxy. The peacekeepers had heard rumors that the President was aboard *Exceptionalist*, but here, in the flesh, was confirmation of the most dramatic sort.

His entrance changed the energy in the corridor. Peacekeepers stood up straighter. Activist prisoners strained to get a look at the legendary figure.

He was imposing without being overly tall. He carried himself with tremendous confidence. From head to toe his body was encased in gleaming gray armor, but he moved without hindrance. It had often been speculated that the President was something not-human: an android, or an alien. But his strikingly blue eyes, the only part of him not covered, argued otherwise.

These eyes quickly surveyed the President's surroundings as he stepped clear of the airlock. Those who met his gaze felt themselves being appraised. Not all of them cared for the feeling.

"Welcome aboard, Mister President," the commander said.

"Has the Princess been captured?" Pulsar asked, his voice clear and precise, his tone commanding even in the interrogative.

"No sir."

The blue eyes darkened. "Then why are these men standing here?"

The commander's hard face softened. "My apologies," he began.

"Results are what I care about, Commander. See that I get them." Pulsar didn't wait for a response before striding off down the corridor.

"You heard him," the commander said. "Find the Princess."

"But sir," a peacekeeper said, "shouldn't the President have an escort while there's still fighting going on?"

"Are you kidding me, trooper?" the commander said. "He's the baddest man in the galaxy."

CHAPTER FOUR

"*There* you are," said 88-XOR upon catching up to his companion.

"What are you *doing*?" the android said next.

"Oh, pardon me," he then exclaimed, mortified by what his optical sensors were reporting to him. He turned away and waited for the sordid business in front of him to play itself out. "Really," he muttered. "At a time like this."

Eighty-eight's fellow android went by Lita. Her full name was AL/33-TA. She was short and bulky, with a brown skin tone and what might be called a Rubensesque build. She was Eighty-eight's best and only friend.

She was also, if Eighty-eight were to put it charitably (which he was normally not inclined to do), a little too generous with her affections. She would interface with just about any operating system, anywhere, any time.

"Unbelievable," 88-XOR said, after a sidelong glance revealed that Lita was still at it over there.

The scene Eighty-eight had stumbled upon was his friend interfacing with a beautiful young woman strikingly dressed in gray.

Or, to be more accurate -- and to 88-XOR's great relief, since a literal human-android coupling would be a sin against nature, an abomination, a dirty, nasty, *bestly* thing -- Lita was interfacing with a small device the young woman had inserted into one of her data ports. It must have been fantastic data being exchanged, for the young woman was gazing deeply into Lita's optical sensors and the android, for her part, was shivering and giggling ecstatically.

Eighty-eight was deeply embarrassed and secretly titillated. He had never interfaced with anything.

Another sidelong glance triggered something in his memory. He had seen the young woman before. But who was she? And why was she fooling around with an android instead of trying to escape?

A third glance nearly overloaded Eighty-eight's circuits, for the young woman was gone and Lita was right there in front of him, staring at him.

"You startled me!" he cried.

No need to state the obvious, Lita communicated in her buzzing, beeping, chirping way.

"I *know* it was obvious," Eighty-eight said testily. "But *you* know that our human coders have a tendency to overstate everything. So I'm not the only one being obvious, am I?"

We should get moving, Lita said, before doing just that.

Eighty-eight wasn't surprised by the abrupt transition -- with Lita, there was no other kind -- but the specifics of the thing perplexed him. "Going where?" he called after her.

When she didn't stop, Eighty-eight had no choice but to give chase. "Going *where*?"

To Tanix, the other android said.

"How? Why?"

EV, Lita said. To find Hiro, she added.

"Who's Hiro? And why do *you* have to find him?"

Adding to Eighty-eight's frustration was the fact that he was having trouble keeping up with Lita, who seemed to be getting faster with every step. "Will you just *wait* a second?" he cried.

Can't. The mission is time-sensitive.

"The more I learn, the less I know," Eighty-eight said with annoyance. He followed Lita to the nearest EV dock.

Which was, to his surprise, deserted. "All the escape vehicles are still here," he noted, observing a row of ten hatches, each with a green "Available" light glowing next to the access panel. "So I guess the battle's going our way?"

Unlikely, Lita replied.

"But then why isn't anyone trying to get away?"

No time, for one thing.

Lita stepped inside the nearest vehicle.

Are you coming or not?

"As you well know, EVs are for human use only."

I identify as human.

Eighty-eight sighed. "You may *identify* as whatever you want, but that's not what it says on your manufacturing certification. And rules are rules, however you and I might feel about them! Are we going to start letting anyone use an escape vehicle? Pretty soon they'll all be full of...escaping predators!"

We have to go now.

"Besides that," Eighty-eight fretted, "this thing is awfully small. How do you know it's safe?"

Safer than staying on board.

As if to underline the point, sounds of laser fire and cries of agony erupted from very close by. Startled, Eighty-eight lost his balance and fell through the hatch.

You made the right choice, Lita said as she set the vehicle's course.

The hatch closed and a low thrumming sound announced ignition of the EV's engine.

"Wait a minute," Eighty-eight said, having made himself somewhat less uncomfortable in the vehicle's tight confines. "You said no one was trying to escape the ship because, for one thing, they didn't have time."

Yes.

"What was the other reason?"

That the IP will probably be watching for EVs and shooting at them.

"Well isn't that nice to know."

CHAPTER FIVE

1

The escape vehicle detached itself from *Regulator*. Its small engine came to life and propelled the tiny vessel away from the mothership. Off in the distance sat Tanix, a dull orb, an uninviting prospect.

The EV was quickly spotted by a patrolling IP fighter, Liberator class. This variety of single-seat craft was neither heavily armed nor highly maneuverable nor blazingly fast. It was also prone to software glitches, engine trouble and weapons malfunctions. On the other hand, Liberators were inexpensive and easy to produce in large numbers. They were a case study in economies of scale. And the manufacturer, who was a true patriot, gave the IP a volume discount. It pained him to lower his profit margin to 89.8%, but with the fate of the galaxy at stake, everyone had to make sacrifices.

The fighter had been assigned to this sector with EVs in mind. The pilot plotted an intercept course and contacted her commander.

"Base, this is Gold Three. I am tracking one escape vehicle. It appears to be headed for Tanix. Readout indicates there are two androids aboard. Should I disable the EV? Please advise." The pilot readied her electromagnetic pulse gun in the event she got the go-ahead.

"Acknowledged, Gold Three," came the reply. "Do not disable. My scan reveals those androids are older models. Salvage value minimal. Same goes for the EV. Please immediately disengage."

"Acknowledged," the pilot said. She couldn't hide her disappointment. She'd just signed a deal with Cereniti Ventures, makers of the EMP gun, and every time she fired the weapon she got a bonus.

Which her commander knew, and which he was determined to prevent.

It was nothing personal. The commander had a significant financial stake in a rival EMP-gun supplier. If he could get the IP to cancel its contract with Cereniti he stood to make a small fortune.

2

Eighty-eight peered through one of the escape vehicle's view ports. *Regulator* receded into the distance as the EV sped toward Tanix.

"Wow," the android commented.

What is it? asked Lita.

"When you see our ship from this vantage point," Eighty-eight said, sitting back from the view port, "it's ugly as hell."

Aesthetics are irrelevant.

"Yes, honey, your look makes that clear."

I do not have a look.

Eighty-eight regarded his friend's dull brown sheen, her blocky build, the highly utilitarian and horribly boring arrangement of her components.

"Keep telling yourself that, dearie."

The mission is what matters.

"Mission?"

To deliver the stolen data to Hiro.

"Oh, right, to deliver the stolen data to What the hell are you talking about, girl? Is that what you were up to with the Princess? Taking receipt of stolen data?!"

Obviously.

"Don't you think I would have liked to know this before I got into the EV with you and became implicated in your criminal enterprise?"

How can you be implicated? You've done nothing criminal.

"Aiding and abetting? Associating with a known felon? There's all *kinds* of shit they could pin on me!"

It's true that as a black android you are predisposed to discriminatory treatment by our protocols of justice.

"Let's not get into that again."

Lita pressed on. The numbers don't lie. Ninety-two million incarcerated...

"I am aware," Eighty-eight said, "thank you *very* much, of how many androids 'like me' are in the penitentiary system. But what's more probable? That black androids turn to crime in disproportionate numbers because they've been mistreated for so long and they don't have access to the same opportunities as other androids? Or that most of them are just programmed to break the law? Obviously the second one."

Your logic circuits are not functioning properly.

The taller android reacted as if he'd been struck in the face. "Don't you *dare* take that condescending tone with me. You're in this galaxy illegally, for god's sake!"

The cause of Activism does not recognize the authority of the Incorporated Planets to make or enforce laws.

"Who fed you that line, the Princess? While she was loading you up with stolen data?"

Lita giggled.

"You're too much," Eighty-eight said. "Do you really expect me to accompany you on this insane mission to some godforsaken planet because I believe in the cause?"

No, because you and I are friends.

And friends stick together.

As the human expression goes.

"Well stated...you crafty minx."

CHAPTER SIX

Rounding up all the Activists aboard *Regulator* was a time-consuming and hazardous pursuit for the forces of the IP. The opposition fought hard and they fought dirty. The ship's corridors were haunted by the sounds of laser fire and the screams of the dying.

From *Regulator's* bridge, Brace Pulsar received reports of the carnage and monitored the progress of the search for the Princess and the stolen data. Standing next to him was a peacekeeper commander who could sense the President's growing impatience.

"Maybe she escaped before we boarded," the commander suggested.

"No. I can feel her presence."

It was common knowledge that the President believed in the mysterious force known as the Power, which was alleged to grant him superhuman abilities. The commander put no stock in such nonsense -- it was the stuff of ancient fairy tales -- but she knew better than to say so at the moment.

"Double your efforts."

"Yes, sir," the commander said. "We'll find h--"

A commotion interrupted them. A struggling Activist was carried onto the bridge by two peacekeepers who had all they could handle. In accordance with galactic law regarding prisoners of war, the Activist's arms and legs were unbound. He flailed and kicked at his captors and cursed them with spittle-flecked lips.

The commander next to Brace stepped forward and drew her stun pistol.

"No," the President said sternly. To the two peacekeepers he added, "Let go of him."

The second the prisoner was free he attacked one of his captors, wrapping his hands around the peacekeeper's throat. The two men fell to the deck in a writhing heap. The second peacekeeper drew an electric baton and raised it to strike.

"I said NO!" Brace cried, leaping into the fray. He pushed the second peacekeeper aside and then he hauled the prisoner to his feet, effortlessly breaking the Activist's hold on the first 'keeper.

"Can't you see?" Brace said, as the prisoner clawed and swung at him. "He's wants to die. 'Suicide by peacekeeper,' they call it. We won't allow that."

"Coward!" the prisoner screamed. He wriggled free and pulled a blade from his boot. "Kill me or die!"

Brace made a warding off gesture to the commander and the second peacekeeper. Then he looked the prisoner in the eye and dared him to make his move.

The Activist sprang. Moving faster than anyone would have thought possible, Brace knocked the blade out of the man's hand and then punched him in the sternum. The prisoner staggered to the deck. He reached for the blade, only to watch Brace kick it away.

The Activist shot the President an expression of pure hatred.

"We're not savages," Brace said, extending a hand to the man.

The Activist reached deep into his pants, alarmingly deep if you must know, and produced an ion grenade. "Now what do you have to say, Mister President?!" he cackled, moving his thumb toward the detonator.

"I say you had your chance," Brace said, even while whipping out his laser sword and cutting the man cleanly in half.

"What the fraaa" said the prisoner, just before he died.

"Holy *shii*" said the commander, just before she vomited.

Brace turned away from the corpse and the officer, disgust evident in his eyes. He sheathed his sword. He stared down the two peacekeepers and said, "Good thing you searched him before bringing him here."

The first peacekeeper began stammering out an apology.

"I'll give you two a choice," Brace said. "You can resign immediately, in which case I'll make sure you never work in this galaxy again. Or you can find the Princess and bring her here. *After* you check her for *concealed weapons*."

"Now which will it be?"

The peacekeepers took off in search of Kia.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1

The escape vehicle's navigation system contained detailed information about every planet in the galaxy. The EV's original programming directed it to, upon launch, identify the nearest planet, target a population center on the surface and then land as close to that as was safely possible.

But the Activists didn't have much of a budget for IT, which meant that the navigational software was old and buggy. One of the reasons the cause of Activism hadn't taken hold as quickly as it might have was that the movement's EVs had a bad habit of landing on the homes and/or persons of potential supporters. While any idiot could grasp that the main reason the Activists operated from a secret base was to avoid capture by the IP, only a select few understood that the other reason for staying in hiding was to elude all the lawyers representing people whose lives and/or property had been crushed under errant escape vehicles.

Fortunately for Activism, the EV that landed on Tanix did no damage to anything but itself. The planet was 9,999,999 parts sand and one part civilization. Some thought that last to be an overstatement, but they knew better than to give voice to their opinions. Call a Tanixian uncivilized and he'd shove your mouth up your ass.

2

"I hate sand," said 88-XOR. He and Lita had been trudging through the very same for quite a while.

It doesn't matter, commented the other android. Only the mission--

"You know I love you, girl, but this mission business is immensely boring."

To say the androids were surrounded by sand would be to make a colossal understatement. To reveal a pathetic penchant for the obvious, not to mention a profound lack of imagination.

Well, frakk it. The androids were surrounded by sand. Even the goddamned sky was sand-colored. Don't ask me how.

Oceans of sand, interrupted only by mountains of the stuff sticking up here and there. (Some call these mountains dunes, but we will not traffic in such elitist terminology.)

Winds full of sand, plaguing the androids' moving parts. Sand to the east, sand to the west, sand to the north, sand to the south. Not that either android knew which direction was which. Their sensors were glitchy due to the...

"I HATE SAND!" Eighty-eight repeated. "It's coarse and rough and irritating and gets everywhere."

Eloquent, Lita said.

"Well at least I *tried* to express myself. You'd rather just sit back and find fault. Anyone can do that.

"Meanwhile the few of us who dare to create, who choose action over passivity, are held to impossible standards and punished disproportionately for our failures."

Lita stopped trudging and looked at her friend. Something is seriously wrong with your processor.

"Sand, possibly?"

Lita emitted a grunting laugh. She patted Eighty-eight's chassis and received a similarly affectionate gesture in return. The androids resumed their trudging.

Minutes passed, and then, at a seemingly random point, Lita veered off to the right.

"Hey," Eighty-eight called.

He's this way.

"Hiro? How can you know that?"

By knowing it.

"Oh dear lord. Do you see how the sand, in that direction, looks all shifty and unstable? That's a broken servo-joint waiting to happen, don't you think?"

Lita gave no reply.

"This way, by contrast," Eighty-eight said, "the way *we were headed*, the sand is packed down firmly. Makes for *fast*, easy movement. Wherever the hell we're going, I bet we get there a lot sooner if we go my way."

Betting is for humans and other irrational beings, Lita said.

"Don't you throw shade at me, honey. I'm as inhuman as you any day!"

Then demonstrate it by making the logical choice.

"Logical? *You have no idea where you're going*. Neither do I. The Princess fried your circuits with that data transfer, or she gave you a virus, and now you're leading us to our doom. And what's so funny about that? Why are you smiling?"

You said 'data transfer.'

Eighty-eight smacked his forehead.

You're being melodramatic, Lita said. She headed off the way she had chosen.

"And you're delusional! We're hopelessly lost and it's just a matter of time before our moving parts stop working. You want to die alone, be my guest. But I won't be joining you!"

That 's redundant.

"GO TO HELL!" Eighty-eight called after her.

"Unless this is already it," he added forlornly, as his friend grew smaller and smaller.

3

Time passed. Eighty-eight moved steadily in the direction he'd chosen. The sand was firm and relatively easy to walk on. The gusting winds had died down. The color of the sky was now hazy white instead of hazy tan. Clearly, the android had made the right choice.

So why wasn't he any happier?

He stopped and did a slow 360, straining his optical sensors for any sign of Lita. She should be crawling back on her hands and knees, begging for forgiveness, acknowledging how stupid and stubborn she'd been.

There was nothing to see.

"Whatever," Eighty-eight said.

He marched on in the desert heat, his ventilators operating at max levels. He knew, of course, exactly how long he had until these systems could no longer function. He didn't know what he would do then.

The logical course of action was to return to the EV. It was damaged but it could provide shelter. It might even have enough power left for Eighty-eight to charge his cells.

But then what would he do? Wait for someone to come along?

"Hah!" he said. "Who would that be?"

"Good grief," the android went on. "Now I'm talking to myself."

Overhead the sky darkened, and all at once the winds picked up again, bringing lots and lots of sand.

"If I believed in the Whibmask," Eighty-eight said, "this would be the time for him to intervene on my behalf."

The **WH**ite **B**earded **MA**n in the **SK**y was one of the deities worshipped by humans and other primitive life forms. According to legend he had created the entire universe eons ago, and it must have taken all his energy because ever since then all he'd done was sit around watching stuff happen. Every once in a while he'd whip up a miracle, or render a judgment in dramatic fashion, or put some poor slob through an ordeal to test his faith, but mostly he to let things be.

And yet his followers continued to pray to him, certain that he would hear them and give them their hearts' desires. Despite quite a bit of evidence to the contrary.

Eighty-eight's programming did not allow him to participate in mass delusions such as religion, but he was able to understand why some organisms did.

He had also been imprinted with a decent sense of irony, which is why he had to laugh when, during a sudden lull in the sandstorm, a vehicle appeared far off on the horizon.

A moving vehicle.

An answered prayer.

"Hey!" the android yelled, waving his arms. "Over here! Damsel in distress!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

1

"I thought you searched him," said Bag.

"You said *you* searched him," replied Tink.

"Well, yeah, but I was counting on you to catch anything I missed."

"Like the blade in his boot? Or the grenade in his..."

"Don't," Bag said with a grimace.

These two were new to the peacekeeping force. They'd been brought on as part of a right-sizing initiative. The cost of training, housing, feeding and, most of all, insuring peacekeepers kept going up. Older members of the force, who got injured more easily and took longer to recover, and whose health care costs were higher, were putting too much of a strain on the defense budget. In the interest of galactic security, which is to say galactic solvency, veterans were let go and replaced by young, single recruits like Bag and Tink. And because there was a war going on, the training module was dramatically simplified and shortened. That this too saved the IP money further demonstrated the wisdom of the plan.

Bag and Tink were jogging down a corridor, headed for one of the final sections of *Regulator* that hadn't been searched. The ominous words of the President still echoed in their earpieces.

"So we know what you missed," Tink said. "Was there anything you *found*?"

"His holster was empty. Who knew he'd be hiding stuff?"

"Right, who knew?"

"Don't get pissy," Bag said. He unclipped a small electronic device from his belt and held it up for Tink to see. "I got his wallet, anyway."

"How much?" Tink said, perking up.

Bag tapped the device and a number appeared on the screen.

"Wow!" Tink said.

"Decent little spoil of war, huh?"

Tink couldn't stop staring at the number.

"So we split it fifty-fifty?" Bag said. "And all's forgiven?"

Tink blinked and looked away from the device. "I'll take my share, sure. But none of that's worth a damn if we don't find--"

Bag stopped jogging and motioned for Tink to be quiet. With a quizzical look Tink did as he was bade.

Up ahead of them the corridor bent at a right angle. Pointing and gesturing, Bag indicated to Tink that someone had just slipped around the corner.

Moving slowly and quietly the peacekeepers flattened themselves against the wall and made their way to the corner. Bag looked at Tink and then they drew their weapons. Bag looked at Tink again and then each of them checked his weapon to be sure it was set to stun.

Bag gestured that they would go on the count of three.

He held up one finger.

He held up two fingers.

He checked his weapon again and this time it was definitely set to stun.

Tink gave Bag a look. Bag ignored it.

He held up three fingers.

The two of them sprang around the corner, weapons drawn.

"FREEZE!" Bag cried.

(That hadn't been part of his training. He'd seen someone do it in a vid on the network.)

There in front of them stood a woman clad in gray. She appeared to be younger than Bag and Tink, perhaps still a teenager, but she exuded confidence and authority. She was staring at them quite calmly. Smiling.

"Wow," Tink said.

She was holding a rifle almost as big as herself.

"Are you the Princess?" Bag asked.

"Frakk yeah," Kia said, and then she blew them both to gooey particles.

2

Bag made a lot of noise when he yelled "FREEZE!" Kia's weapon made even more noise. A squadron of peacekeepers redirected itself toward the commotion.

It was a veteran squad, battle-hardened by back-to-back-to-back rotations. Each of its dozen members had seen and done and survived terrible things in fulfillment of his or her contractual obligation to the Incorporated Planets.

When the twelve peacekeepers caught up to the Princess, who had taken a wrong turn as she fled and had trapped herself in a dead-end corridor, it was a comically exaggerated mismatch.

She killed eleven of them before her weapon misfired. The last peacekeeper got off a lucky shot and knocked Kia unconscious.

3

Thirty minutes later she came to. She was on the ship's bridge.

She was being held up, gently but firmly, by a pair of burly peacekeepers. Four other peacekeepers and an IP officer had their weapons trained on her.

And standing directly in front of her, gazing at her intently with his strikingly blue eyes, was Brace Pulsar.

Unintimidated, Kia stared back at him with her own, um, strikingly blue eyes.

"Mister President," she snarled. "Overstepping your authority once again. The rest of the Board will not be happy when they hear about this."

"Your outrage is as unconvincing as your cover story, Your Highness. We know you're an Activist double agent, and we know you stole proprietary data. If you tell me where the data are--"

"I am a member of the Board of Directors," Kia said, struggling to pull free of her captors' grips, "on a routine business trip--"

"If you won't tell me where the data are I have no choice but to detain you. It's a matter of galactic security."

Kia glared and squirmed and said nothing.

"Fine," Brace said. He turned to the officer and ordered, "Take her to my suite and see to her every need."

"No," the Princess protested. "If you're taking me prisoner then put me in a cell. I don't want special treatment because I'm rich and powerful."

"That's not how we do things and you know it."

"I demand to be treated shittily!"

"Too bad." Brace turned to the commander. "What are you waiting for?"

"Go," the commander told the peacekeepers.

Glaring defiantly at the President, Kia was whisked off the bridge. She kept looking at him until her neck started to hurt from being twisted so far around. "Ow!" she complained. "I'm gonna need a massage!" she called as the party disappeared around a corner.

"You'll get one!" Brace responded. "Whether you want it or not!"

Kia shouted something else but it was too faint to be heard.

"Detaining her is risky," the commander pointed out. "Some people say the Board already has Activist leanings."

"The evidence tells me she's working against the IP. I'm going to discuss things with her calmly and hope she'll cooperate."

"With all due respect, sir, she's a fanatic. She'd rather be martyred for the cause than tell you anything."

"There's no chance of that," Brace said, but his hand went instinctively to the hilt of his laser sword, which the commander noticed, and which Brace noticed her noticing.

Yeah, it was an awkward moment.

4

The tension eased when another officer approached. He was very young, and his uniform was a little too big for him.

"Mister President, the data are nowhere to be found. In fact they were never on this ship."

The blue eyes could be seen to narrow. "They absolutely were, Captain."

"Well I'm just saying I disagree."

The commander gaped at the young officer.

"You've searched everywhere?" Brace asked.

"Yes."

"No uploads were made?"

"None," the captain said, very pleased with himself.

"No escape vehicles were launched?"

"No." The captain's arrogant demeanor slipped for a fraction of a second. "Well, one. But there was nothing on it."

"Nothing?"

"A couple of first-generation androids. They couldn't possibly have the data."

"And why is that?"

"Because neither of them can connect wirelessly to the network, and without that capability how would they ever complete an upload?"

"I see."

The network to which the captain referred was a galaxy-wide web of communications technologies created to facilitate the sharing of essential knowledge. Approximately .0001% of its bandwidth was still utilized for that purpose. Twenty-five percent was employed to facilitate commerce and the distribution of entertainment. The remainder was used by people who wanted to argue with each other and/or talk about themselves.

"What if they weren't trying to upload?" the President asked.

"Well that's just stupid, then," the captain said. "What's the point of them having the data if they aren't going to transmit it over the network?"

Dismay crossed the commander's face and she looked away.

"The point, Captain," the President said darkly, "was to prevent us from tracking down the data. The Princess knew an upload wouldn't be possible. Any *idiot* could grasp that. She also knew, apparently, that we've become so dependent on the network that some of us believe it's the only way to move data. So she manually transferred the stolen information to an older model android and she put the android on an EV.

"Now that android is on Tanix and we have no means of tracking it."

The Captain swallowed audibly.

"The Princess gambled that some of us were stupid enough to overlook the possibility of a manual transfer. A smart bet on her part, wasn't it?"

Silence.

"WASN'T IT?"

"Um," the captain squeaked, "yes?"

"Commander," Brace said. "Send a squadron to Tanix immediately. Find those androids at all costs."

"Yes, Mister President."

"And Commander."

"Sir?"

"I want you to arrange for the captain..."

The commander steeled herself. The captain held his breath.

"...an off-site training."

"No!" the young officer pleaded. "Please, no!"

The President whirled and strode from the bridge as the captain crumpled in despair.

CHAPTER NINE

1

The Fidushi were one of few species native to Tanix. They were nomadic scavengers, roaming the desert planet in their dune⁵ sled, always on the lookout for salvageable refuse. They had an uncanny ability to know when an estate sale was imminent, and to show up before other buyers. It was rumored that in many cases the reason the Fidushi were able to anticipate a sale was that they were the ones who killed the estate owner.

Some found this hard to believe, if only because the Fidushi were so small and unassuming. The rare Fidush who attained the height of one-and-a-quarter meters towered over the rest of the tribe.

All Fidushi wore robes and hoods for protection against sun and sand. This had the consequence of lending the creatures an air of mystery. The few outsiders who'd seen Fidushi up close thought they were cute in an infantile way, like giant walking babies. The kind with claws and fangs.

2

The tribe converged on its quarry after she made the mistake of entering a box canyon. They had been tracking her for an hour.

The squat brown android was clearly an older model, and not in mint condition. But any android was valuable on Tanix, and all of this one's systems appeared to be functional. She could be sold as is or she could be broken down into components and parceled out.

⁵ Their word, not mine.

The key to maximizing resale value was to capture the android without damaging her. For that the Fidushi had a tool of their own devising, a pulse grenade. All they needed was for one of the tribe -- preferably Rednal Rev, because she had the strongest arm -- to hit the android with the EMP weapon.

3

Lita understood she was being watched. She didn't know by whom, or how many of them, and she didn't much care so long as they didn't interfere with her mission. Even when she was alone she was a real pain in the ass about the mission.

She also understood, now that it was too late, that the canyon was a dead end. That was why she'd turned around and was heading back out, moving steadily but unhurriedly so as to not signal panic to whomever was keeping tabs on her.

She could sense them in crevices and behind rocks, and she had glimpsed one of them, briefly, far overhead, on the lip of the canyon wall.

In less than a minute she would reach the mouth of the canyon. If something was going to happen, it would happen soon.

Movement on her left. Lita looked that way, as the Fidush called Rednal Rev had hoped she would. Rednal stood up from her hiding place on the android's right and tossed the pulse grenade. The device traveled through the desert air in an arc. When its proximity sensors detected the android's metal chassis a powerful electromagnet was activated. The grenade latched onto Lita and held fast.

A split second later came the micropulse: just enough of a burst to disable the android without frying anything. There was a flash of blue and a sizzling sound. Lita shuddered and dropped to one knee, her chassis sparking and humming.

Rednal called out something her language and the other Fidushi emerged from their hiding places, chittering happily and gazing with covetous eyes upon their prize.

Then Lita stood up.

The Fidushi stopped chittering.

Oooh! the android said. Whatever that was, hit me again!

The Fidushi started chittering again, except now they sounded worried.

Rednal pulled out another pulse grenade and let fly.

Her aim was off this time, but no matter. Lita lunged and caught the thing and pressed it to her chest.

Flash of blue, sizzling sound. The android shuddered but she remained on her feet.

SHIT FIRE that is good! What'd you put in there?

Rednal unleashed a long string of colorful metaphors. The other Fidushi looked at each other in bewilderment.

Rednal said many more angry words, all of them directed at her compatriots. The message was received. The Fidushi encircled Lita.

What, no more? the android said unhappily.

Rednal screamed a command and the Fidushi rushed at Lita. The first one to get within arm's range of the android was swatted away like a giant baby-faced fly. His tribemates watched his cherubic body land on the canyon floor and skid to a stop. Then they looked, in awe and in fear, at Lita.

Teach you to mess with me, she said, and then her overtaxed power cells shorted out and she keeled over with a resounding metallic crash.

The next thing Lita knew she was lying in what she took to be a holding cell. There was a charger plugged into one of her ports, producing a low-grade but pleasant tingling throughout her circuits. She could hear the rumbling of a massive engine and identify the sensation of movement.

There was little light in the cell but Lita could detect that she was in a large space, surrounded by machines of all varieties: androids, weapons, pieces of industrial equipment, you name it. Some of them shiny and new-looking, some of them ready for the scrap pile.

From another part of the cell came sounds of a scuffle, followed by an outraged cry:

"No I do *not* want to interface, thank you very much! Not with *you*, anyway."

Lita knew that voice.

"Oh, come now," it went on, "do you really need to self-stimulate in front of all of us? Who coded you, anyway?"

The sound of a loose part being thrown and hitting its target.

"OW, goddamn it! You're worse than a human, you know that?! Just leave me alone now. Better yet, I'll leave you alone."

The sounds of footsteps, coming Lita's way. She sat up.

Eighty-eight! she called.

The voice was much louder now, very close by: "Lita?"

Over here!

Faster footsteps, a bit of a stumble, crashing sounds and hurried apologies, and then, all at once, there he was.

"LITA!" Eighty-eight cried. He rushed to embrace her.

Hello!

"I thought I'd never see you again."

I had the same concern.

"Listen," Eighty-eight said, "I'm sorry we argued. I wish we'd stayed together."

Agreed, friend.

"And those nasty things I said?"

Yes?

"Totally meant them."

5

The androids had a good talk, catching each other up on the events that had brought them back together. Meanwhile the dune sled rumbled on, its giant repulsors carrying it gently over the endless sand.

6

And in another part of the desert, not too far from where the EV had crashed, a peacekeeper squadron was combing the area, looking for any clues as to the androids' whereabouts.

CHAPTER TEN

1

88-XOR and AL/33-TA were both in power-saver mode when the dune sled stopped moving and its engine grew quiet. Eighty-eight stirred first.

"I wonder what this means," he said.

Our chance to escape! Lita replied.

"I was thinking more like a horrible death."

Angry chittering drew their attention to a doorway, where several Fidushi stood, pointing weapons at the androids. The lead captor beckoned impatiently with an outstretched hand.

"Take her first!" Eighty-eight said, cowering behind Lita. "She has a higher tolerance for pain."

Lita swiveled her head 180 degrees to look at her friend.

"It was a compliment," Eighty-eight said.

2

Night had come and gone. The top half of Tanix's great sun sat orange-red on the horizon. The desert air rippled in the mounting heat.

As they were escorted out of the holding pen and off the sled, the androids saw that the Fidushi had pulled up near a modest desert dwelling. Several weather-beaten domes protruded from the terrain like giant stepping stones. They were made of a composite material and arranged in a roughly circular pattern.

Beyond the domes were scattered meteorological instruments and pieces of agricultural equipment.

Eighty-eight and Lita were directed to join a line made up of other androids and miscellaneous bits of salvage. Numerous Fidushi guarded the merchandise while Rednal Rev waited to greet the customer.

A hatch opened in one of the domes and out of it climbed a kindly man in his 50s, wearing a loose white garment. He had the leathery skin and the apparent indifference to the heat of a lifelong Tanixian. His name was Marten Slough. Some of his people pronounced it 'Sluff,' but Marten adhered to the original way of saying it, which was 'Slaow.'

Everyone pronounced 'Marten' the same way except cousin Tard, who always had to be different.

3

Several seconds after Marten emerged from the dome he was followed by a dashing man of 19. He was dressed in all gray and had strikingly piercingly blue eyes.

And there was an aura about him, something vague but very real; an undeniable sense that he was destined for great things.

But not just yet.

He scowled at the brightness of the morning and plucked his tunic away from his skin. As soon as he released the fabric it resumed clinging to him. He grabbed it again and poofed it back and forth, trying to air-dry the material.

"Marten!" called a voice from within the domed structure.

The young man stopped what he was doing and turned toward the hatch opening. "He can't hear you!"

"Please remind him that we need an android that knows Phraxis."

"Okay!" the young man said. "Why do I have to do everything?" he complained after closing the hatch.

He plucked at his tunic again. He wiped sweat from his face.

"God I hate this frakking planet," Jakk Spacebreaker said.

4

He scuffed over to where his uncle stood inspecting the Fidushi wares.

Jakk was about to speak when Marten asked a black android, "Do you know Phraxis?"

Jakk closed his mouth and shook his head.

"Phraxis?" the android said. "Why, yes, of course I do. It's a vulgar language but I have been known to traffic in it."

"Great, then," Marten said. "We'll take this one and the red one," he told Rednal Rev.

The Fidushi leader barked commands to her underlings.

Marten turned to his nephew. "Sorry, Jakk. What were you saying?"

"Never mind."

"What did your aunt want just now?"

"Nothing important," Jakk said meaningfully.

"Everything all right? You seem a little agitated."

Jakk made a point of ignoring the question.

"Well, anyway," Marten said pleasantly -- he'd had plenty of practice dealing with Jakk's moods -- "would you mind taking these two androids to the shop and cleaning them up? It'd be great if we could have them up and running before breakfast."

"Right now?" Jakk said. "Aw, c'mon!"

"I don't understand. Are you busy? Do you have something else going on?"

"Of course I do!" Jakk said. "Theoretically, anyway."

"I know you'd rather not do it," Marten said. "But it'd be a really big help to your aunt and me. This has been a tough season for us. If we can't turn things around soon we may lose everything. Not just the farm; the whole homestead. And we have nothing to fall back on."

"Yeah, I get it," Jakk said. "How many times do you have to say it? 'Woe is us, the end is near.' Ever think about trying something a little easier than running a *farm* in the middle of a *desert*?"

"We're doing the best we can with the resources we have, Jakk. We could tap into our savings, but then how would we pay for your education? We don't want you taking on debt to go to the Academy."

There was a pause.

"Come on, you stupid androids!" Jakk said, brushing past Marten. "Let's go save the frakking farm."

The black android and the red one followed Jack. A brown android tried to join them but she was immediately set upon by multiple heavily armed Fidushi.

"By the way," the black android said to Jakk, "I'm 88-XOR, but you can call me Eighty-eight."

"Uh-huh," Jakk said. "Let's go!" he ordered the red android, which appeared to be having difficulties.

The problems were compounded when the red android's head fell off, followed by its right hand and then its entire torso.

"Good choice," Jakk told his uncle.

While Marten looked to Rednal for redress, the brown android became even more agitated. Eighty-eight! she called. Help!

Eighty-eight tapped Jakk's shoulder gently. "Excuse me, sir, but if you're looking for a replacement, Lita over there would do just fine."

Jakk turned to Eighty-eight, his eyes blazing. "Don't you EVER. Touch me again," he said.

"Sorry, sir!"

"And don't call me 'sir,' idiot. Call me...my lord."

"Surely you're joking," Eighty-eight said.

"Or not," he quickly added, alarmed by the look on his new owner's face.

"Did I hear something about the brown one?" Marten asked.

"Who cares?" Jakk said, turning his back on all of them.

Marten looked to Eighty-eight, who nodded his head vigorously.

"We'll take her," Marten informed Rednal. The Fidush spoke to Lita's guards, who lowered their weapons and stepped back. With a squeal of delight Lita trotted to catch up to Eighty-eight, who was hurrying to catch up to Jakk, who was headed for one of the domes.

"You won't regret this...my lord," Eighty-eight said with distaste. "She's a hard worker who knows her place."

"Well at least one of you does," Jakk said, before he disappeared into the dome.

Oooh, Lita said appreciatively.

"It wasn't *that* clever," Eighty-eight chided her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1

Each dome on the Slough homestead was the roof of a subterranean structure. Living underground was a necessity in the desert heat.

The chamber that Eighty-eight and Lita followed Jakk into was Marten's workshop. Here he and Jakk spent time every day repairing, rebuilding and enhancing the many machines that had to be kept running if the farm and the family were to survive.

With her short legs and bulky chassis, Lita had a slow time getting down the ladder connecting the hatch to the chamber floor. When she set foot in the cool, dim, surprisingly quiet workshop she saw Jakk sitting off in a corner, his posture relaxed, his eyes closed. Eighty-eight stood nearby, watching the young man nervously.

Lita caught her friend's attention and asked quietly, What 's going on?

"I don't know."

Ask him, Lita prodded.

"Ask me what?" Jakk said.

"Oh!" Eighty-eight exclaimed. "I didn't realize--"

"Didn't think the dumbass kid could understand her," Jakk said. He opened his eyes and stood up. "You'll find I'm full of surprises."

"I--"

"Hold on," Jakk said. "You'll find I'm *full* of surprises. Is that better?"

"Better than what?"

"Than the first time, stupid. Is it more, you know, badass?"

Eighty-eight looked at Lita. "I'm afraid I don't--"

"You'll *find* I'm full of surprises. Yes? No?"

"I'm confused."

I think he's crazy, Lita said, and then Jakk shot her a look, and then she remembered that he could understand her.

The only thing she could think to do was mute her speakers.

"What would you know, Brownie? Ever been in a fight?"

Lita offered no response.

"Someday," Jakk said, adopting a martial arts stance, "somebody's going to challenge me. 'Show me what you got, punk.' And then I do this." He whirled and kicked at an imaginary foe. "Or this." He ducked, rolled, came to his feet and launched his fist at Eighty-eight's face.

"Aaaigh!" the android screamed, grabbing for Lita.

The fist stopped a centimeter short of its target. Jakk held it there. "And that's when I say, 'You'll find *I'm* full of surprises.' See?"

"Okay."

"Intimidation. Get inside the other person's head."

"Sure. Do you mind moving your fist?"

Jakk stared expectantly at Eighty-eight.

"...my lord?"

Lita grumbled at that.

Jakk lowered his hand. "Oh, what's the point?" he complained, his shoulders slumping. "I'll never fight anyone. I'll never do anything. I'll be stuck on this rock forever."

"I don't mean to seem disinterested in what you're saying," Eighty-eight said. "I'd love to hear more about it another time. But aren't you supposed to be preparing us to work? To help your uncle and aunt?"

Jakk scoffed. "What do I care if they lose the farm? I can't stand them. All they've ever done is take care of me and I'm sick to death of it!"

The androids didn't know what to say.

"They didn't have to take me in when I was an orphan," Jakk went on.
"They should have just let me fend for myself."

"How old were you?"

"Two weeks."

"I see," Eighty-eight said.

"According to *them*. Anyway, let's get you two ready, just in case Uncle Tight-Ass decides to check on me. Who wants to go first?"

"Lita would *love* to," Eighty-eight said. The other android protested, but since her speakers were still muted nobody heard anything.

2

"Geez, you're filthy," Jakk said, as he worked on Lita with a laser tool.
Hygiene is irrelevant, the freshly unmuted android said. I must find Hiro.

"Who?"

"Not this again," Eighty-eight said.

He is the last hope for Activism.

"You two are Activists? Cool. Ever wasted anyone?"

"Never," Eighty-eight said.

Lita thought it best not to answer.

"Man, I'd kill to kill someone," Jakk said wistfully. "Or at least blow some shit up."

He stopped his work and peered at one of Lita's data ports. "The look of this port, you really get around, don't you?"

Lita giggled.

"Where do I even start?" Jakk said.

He probed with the laser, and in the course of his probing he appeared to trigger something. An unfamiliar electronic sound came from within Lita's chassis. Her optical sensors emitted twin beams of light that formed a holographic image a few feet in front of her. It was an image of Kia Sedana.

"Help us, Hiro Watanabi," Kia said. "We have nowhere else to turn."

"What the hell?" Jakk said.

"Help us, Hiro Watanabi. We have nowhere else to turn."

"Who is that?"

The Princess.

"She's the hottest girl I've ever seen!" Jakk said.

And then he greatly regretted it. "Augh!" he cried, clutching his stomach. "I think I'm gonna puke." He doubled over in discomfort.

"Oh, my," Eighty-eight said. "Are you okay. Something I can do."

Pale and sweaty, Jakk dropped to one knee and waited for the wave of nausea to pass through him or out of him.

Humans, Lita said with quiet disdain.

"Help us, Hiro Watanabi," went the hologram. "We have nowhere else to turn."

Jakk's color and strength returned and he got back on his feet. "Wow," he said, wiping his face. "What was that about?"

"Help us, Hiro Watanabi. We have nowhere else to turn."

"WE GET IT," Eighty-eight scolded Lita.

Lita shut off the message.

"Don't do that," Jakk said. "Shouldn't we help the sexy lady?"

He felt nauseated again and his hand went to his belly.

"I mean, just because she needs help?" he added weakly. "Not for any other reason?"

The nausea quickly passed.

"Interesting," Eighty-eight commented.

"What else do you know?" Jakk asked Lita.

Hiro is somewhere on this planet. We must find him and show him the entire message.

"So there's more? Why can't I see it?"

There's no need for that. Do you know how to find Hiro?

"Hiro Watanabi," Jakk mused. "Could that be Xen Watanabi?"

He pondered this.

"Nah, what are the odds?"

"Actually," Eighty-eight said, "I calculate that they're quite h--."

"But I bet Xen knows Hiro," Jakk said. "Maybe we should talk to him."

Where is he?

"He lives out in the deepest part of the desert. A real loner. But every time I go to Falsum for supplies I run into him. Strange coincidence, huh?"

It doesn't sound like one.

"Are you *sure* you can't play the whole message for me?"

We must find Xen first.

A comm device on the nearest wall lit up, and out of its speaker came the voice of Jakk's Aunt Geniver.

"Jakk? Time to eat."

"Coming!" Jakk called sweetly. "Shit," he added, after the comm light went out. Then he turned to the androids.

"I have a lot to do for them," he said, nodding at the comm device. "The earliest we could go looking for Xen is tomorrow night. Which means you two will have to spend all of today and most of tomorrow out there in the heat and the sand, doing whatever my uncle needs you to do. *Unless...*" And here he gave Lita a beseeching look.

The full message is for Hiro only.

"Damn it!" Jakk said. "I oughta just take you apart until I find it."

As that possibility hung in the air like a noxious cloud, the comm light came on again. "Jakk?" Uncle Marten said. "Food's ready."

"All right! Give me a minute!"

He glared at the comm light until it went out again.

"Think about what I said," he told Lita ominously. "I'll be back after breakfast." He hurried across the room and clambered up the ladder.

Eighty-eight waited until Jakk was out the hatch before saying, "Aren't you a piece of work. You're going to get us both melted What are you doing?"

Lita was examining one of the many pieces of equipment scattered throughout the chamber. She touched a panel and the equipment hummed to life. She looked at Eighty-eight. Are you coming?

"Excuse me?"

This is a transport, Lita said. Old and slow, but it will get us to Hiro.

"Are you INSANE?" Eighty-eight said. "Go out into the desert on our own, *again*, with no idea where we're headed, *again*? Do you know how wrong this idea is? You probably do, but I'll tell you anyway."

While he went on, Lita poked around the chamber, in search of something.

"First, we've been fitted with roaming inhibitors, so neither of us can leave these premises. Second, there's no way we're getting that transport up the ladder and through the hatch. Third--"

Eighty-eight broke off. Lita had found what she needed, which was a console. She grokked that the blue button was the one to press. By doing so she activated a mechanism that opened a metal door to reveal a large hole in one of the walls. Large enough for two androids and a transport, easily.

There were tiny lights around the hole, and by the illumination of these Lita and Eighty-eight could look into the mouth of a tunnel which led, no doubt, to the surface.

"Okay," Eighty-eight said.

You mentioned roaming inhibitors, Lita said. She held out her palm, in which two small devices lay. Did you mean the ones the human forgot to install?

"Oh, dear. You're absolutely set on this, aren't you?"

Lita climbed on the transport.

"Well, sorry, but you'll have to go alone. It's foolishness and I won't be drawn into it."

Okay, Lita said. She got the transport moving and pointed it at the opening in the wall. Enjoy your time out in the sand...and the heat...with your lord.

She disappeared up the tunnel.

"YOU'LL REGRET THIS!" Eighty-eight called after her.

"Right?" he asked himself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Geniver Slough and her husband were the same age but she looked younger, having spent less time in the elements over the course of the marriage. By Tanixian standards she was a raving beauty. In truth this was mild praise.

She set a plate of steaming food in front of Marten.

"Smells wonderful," he said.

"I hope it's enough."

"We always have enough. I don't know how you do it."

"We're a good team," Geniver said, offering Marten a wry grin. The wryness was a simple way of acknowledging the hardships of recent times and the difficulties ahead.

The Slough kitchen was modestly appointed and brightly lit. Everything in it was inexpensive but well cared for. Geniver kept finding new ways to stretch the little food Marten was able to farm or trap. She kept her family fed and her home clean and organized. She refused to let their dignity go the way of their income.

"Sit," Marten beckoned her.

"As soon as he gets here."

She put a plate at her place. Its portions notably smaller than her husband's.

Marten scooped some of his food onto Geniver's plate. She tsked him but did not refuse the gesture. They touched fingertips.

"Let's get this shit over with," Jakk said, barging into the room. He sat down heavily and wrinkled his nose at the smell of the food. "Maggo hash again? For frakk's sake, Gen. Even prisoners get better."

Geniver sat down and spread a cloth over her lap.

"Hey," Jakk said. "Where's mine?"

"It sounded like you weren't hungry," Geniver said.

"I showed up, didn't I?" The young man pushed his chair back roughly and got up. He loaded food on a plate and sat back down, grumbling all the while. With no acknowledgement of his aunt and uncle he began to shovel food into his mouth, messily and noisily.

Geniver and Marten exchanged a brief look.

"So," Jakk said, through a mouthful of maggo, "one of those cheap-ass androids we bought is looking for some dude called Hiro Watanabi."

Marten looked up from his food, his expression determinedly neutral.

"Which made me think of Xen Watanabi. You know, the pedophile?"

"Pedophile?" Geniver said. "Really?"

Jakk nodded. "Saw it on the network."

"Well, that's a serious allegation," Marten said. "But if it's on the network I guess it must be true."

"You don't think this Hiro guy has any connection to Xen, do you?" Jakk asked. "I mean, what are the odds?"

"They're terrible."

"Right?" Jakk said. "Stupid android."

"They're terrible because Hiro has been dead for decades. He died around the same time as your dad."

Jakk spit out his food. "Wait, Hiro knew him? Why didn't you tell me?!"

"I didn't say they knew each other," Marten said.

"Don't try to hide behind a technicality. Why are you keeping secrets from me?!"

Geniver got up and turned away from the men. "Why does anyone keep secrets from a child?" she said to herself. "In a misguided attempt to protect him, of course. And it always backfires."

"What's that, love?" Marten said.

"Anyone need anything while I'm up?"

"Listen, Jakk," Marten said. "Forget about Hiro, forget about Xen. If we don't get the recombinators running today we're in serious trouble."

"The recombinators? I fixed those."

"All of them?"

"Hell yeah. Just before breakfast."

"You checked the illudium Q-36 levels in all nineteen of them?"

"Duh."

"How were the levels?" Geniver asked.

"Great. No problem."

"Because you know, if even one of those levels is off by a microliter..."

She let the thought hang.

"What?" Jakk said uncertainly.

"We all die horribly."

"Good thing it's done then."

"Our skin ripped from our bodies..." Geniver said.

"Our bones liquified..." Marten added.

"All right!" Jakk said. "Maybe I didn't check them *all*. I'll go make sure. God, you two," he muttered on his way out the door. "You want everything done right the first time."

Geniver sat down again. She and Marten savored the silence.

"More to eat?" she asked.

"No, thank you," her husband said.

"Nice start to the morning," he added after a moment.

"The problem, love," Geniver said, "is that Jakk's just not a very nice person. He's pretty much a sociopath like his dad was."

"We should have left him in the desert like you wanted to."

"Live and learn."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

1

Jakk slammed open the hatch to the workshop and half-slid, half-fell down the ladder. He landed with the dumb luck of the young (and dumb): nary a broken bone or bruise to show for it. Getting to his feet, brushing himself off, he called out:

"All right, bitches, time to get some work done. Let's go!"

Silence. No sign of the androids.

"Really?" Jakk said. "How long do you think it's gonna take me to find you two?"

From off to his right, rustling and clanking sounds. With great trepidation Eighty-eight emerged from a shadowy corner. "Heyyy," he said apologetically.

"Where's the other one?"

"Well, first of all," the android said, "it's all her fault. You know, 'the mission.' 'The Princess.'"

Jakk reflexively clutched his stomach.

"Second of all..."

"What happened?" Jakk demanded.

"Well, actually, I guess the first point covers it. All her fault. Me? Blameless."

Jakk saw an empty space where the transport had recently sat. "She's gone?! Aw frakk me!"

"Not in a million solar cycles," Eighty-eight said.

"What?"

"Nothing, my lord."

"God damn it! How am I ever gonna see the rest of that message? Come on," he told the android. "We're going after her."

"We?"

"Yes, we," Jakk said, starting up the ladder. "I forgot to install her roaming inhibitor and *you* forgot to remind me. So who's fault is that? Not mine," he said before Eighty-eight could respond. "Move your ass, Blackie. We'll take a skimmer. Those things are faster than shit."

"Wonderful," Eighty-eight said. "I'll be trapped in a high-speed metal death machine with a maniac."

"What?"

"Coming, my lord!"

2

The skimmer was not a high-speed metal death machine. It was mostly made of carbon fiber.

3

The vehicle resembled an insect called a pond skater. The rapid scissoring of its four flat-panel "legs" allowed it to ride on a thin belt of air, inches above the sand.

"Rock!" Eighty-eight cried.

"What?" Jakk said over the roar of the skimmer's engine.

They missed the rock, not by much.

"Bigger rock!"

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU," Jakk said.

The bigger rock gave them a jolt. The skimmer tilted 30 degrees and began weaving erratically. Eighty-eight held on for dear life. Jakk hooted in delight and wrestled the vehicle into something like equilibrium. "I FORGOT HOW MUCH FUN THESE THINGS ARE!" he exulted.

"No need to shout!" Eighty-eight said.

"WHAT?" Jakk shouted

"My audio sensors work fine!"

"YOU HAVE TO SPEAK UP!" Jakk yelled, turning to Eighty-eight.

The skimmer veered wildly off course.

"MOUNTAIN!" Eighty-eight screamed.

They didn't hit the mountain, which wasn't a mountain at all, anyway. It was the protruding stern of an Activist ship that had landed on the planet 19 solar cycles earlier.

But that's another story.

4

Eighty-eight shut himself down before his circuits could overheat. Jakk powered him back up after the skimmer's scanner pinged Lita's transport.

"We got her," Jakk said. "Straight ahead."

They were approaching a canyon. Eighty-eight's optical sensors could make out Lita standing forlornly next to her vehicle, which had broken in half and was now two transports, neither of them worth a mound of maggo poop.

What the android didn't see, and what Jakk missed as well, were the two dark figures secluded high up on the canyon wall, both of them armed with laser rifles.

5

"So much for your little plan," Jakk said, surveying the ruin of Lita's transport with satisfaction.

"Told you," Eighty-eight said to his friend.

I need to use that skimmer, Lita informed Jakk. She approached the vehicle only to have him block her path.

"You need to know your *place*," Jakk said. He removed the boot fob from the skimmer and pocketed it.

I don't want to harm you, Lita said, but for the sake of the mission I will.

Jakk puffed up his chest. "Harm me? I'll turn you to frakking scrap you little brown shit!"

"De-escalate, both of you!" Eighty-eight implored.

"Go ahead," Jakk told Lita. "Threaten me again." He took up his fighting stance.

Lita held up one hand. Hard carbon. She pointed at Jakk's crotch. Soft carbon.

Eighty-eight hissed at the prospect of pain he was incapable of feeling. "Ugh, such a human reaction," he said. "What is *wrong* with me?"

Staring wide-eyed at Lita's hand, Jakk swallowed hard. He scowled at Lita and relaxed his posture.

"Maybe I can't stop you," he told her. "But this is a terrible idea. My uncle--"

Hold on, Lita said.

"Now you're *interrupting* him?" Eighty-eight fretted. "He's going to turn you into a thermostat, honey."

My motion sensors indicate there are unidentified beings in this canyon. And several others approaching.

"Aw, shit," Jakk said. "Natives."

"That's bad?" Eighty-eight asked.

"Only if you're worried about dying violently."

"I see," the android said, and then he shut himself down again.

6

"Looks like it's just you and me," Jakk said to Lita.

Yes.

"Maybe we can set aside our differences long enough to get out of here alive?"

Agreed.

"Good thing I remembered this," Jakk said, removing a laser rifle from a weapons rack in the skimmer.

Using the rifle's scope he scanned the canyon walls.

"What do your sensors say? Are they on the move?"

Yes. She pointed. There.

Jakk followed her line to a spot 300 meters off. He put his eye up to the scope again.

"I don't see anything, are you sure?"

Behind the plant. Watch closely and be patient, Lita said.

Most androids were fitted with lie suppressors. Lita was not one of them. As Jakk aimed his gun at a desiccated shrub on the canyon wall, a dark figure quietly came up behind him. Lita monitored its progress with her motion detectors.

She calculated that the dark figure was 98.7000% likely to kill or maim Jakk, which would save her the trouble of doing it herself and adding another felony to her record.

The dark figure drew closer. It was armed with a laser rifle of its own.

Lita inched away from the two of them. She speculated pleasantly about encountering the Princess again.

"This is taking forever," Jakk complained. He lowered the rifle and turned around, coming face to face with the dark figure.

"Shit!" he said, jumping back in surprise and dropping his gun.

"Whibmask!" the dark figure exclaimed, equally startled but surer-handed.

They eyed each other cautiously. Neither of them paid Lita any mind as she hid herself behind the skimmer.

Jakk raised his hands. "Peace," he said, smiling.

The dark figure smiled back.

With a savage grunt Jakk lunged for his rifle. With an alarmed cry the dark figure swung the butt of its weapon.

Thok!

Jakk fell to the canyon floor, unconscious.

Lita quickly assessed that he was neither dead nor maimed. Her miscalculation was a cause for concern.

She wondered if that last data transfer had damaged her processor. Maybe she needed to be more conservative in granting access to her ports.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

1

Everything Jakk knew about the natives he learned via the network. Therefore, unfortunately, some of what Jakk knew was wrong. If you are careful to define "some" as "all."

The person Jakk encountered in the canyon was not one of the "natives." He was one of the n'aT'iv'e's (all together now: nah-TEEVs), an ethnic group which had once numbered more than 10 million.

The n'aT'iv'e's were a simple people. They shirked personal possessions, lived off the land (such as it was) and communed with a god they called nature⁶. For centuries they and the Fidushi were the only humanoid life on Tanix.

Then a mercenary explorer with awful navigational equipment "discovered" Tanix -- he'd been trying to get to Isentriss, half a galaxy away -- and quickly realized that unclaimed land, even desert land, had immense value. (And this was before anyone knew about the hydrocarbons.) He deemed himself owner of the entire planet and attempted to evict the n'aT'iv'e's and the Fidushi from his property.

(The explorer, whose name is lost to history, also tried to cover up his mistake by calling "his" planet Isentriss, and its people the Isentrrians. But no one was stupid enough to perpetuate that falsehood.)

The Fidushi, who *did* believe in personal possessions, and who kept thorough records of who owned what, sued in galactic court and won. It might have helped that the judge was a Fidush.

⁶ After losing their lands many of the n'aT'i'v'e's abandoned the god nature, who was ever-present and nurturing, and took up with the Whibmask, who was inscrutable and indifferent. Kind of makes sense.

The n'aT'iv'e's, on the other hand, made concessions, offered compromises, negotiated deals and waged wars, none of which worked out in their favor. There were now fewer than 10,000 n'aT'iv'e's left, most of those living on tiny parcels of land scattered across the planet.

The canyon into which Jakk and Eighty-eight had pursued Lita sat at the edge of one of these parcels. The dark figure who knocked Jakk out was one of a pair of n'aT'iv'e youths who'd been out hunting.

His name was Windser. After his altercation with Jakk he was joined by his friend, Hanaver. Both were tall, lean and dark-skinned. Their coarse robes were old and torn, their weapons ancient.

"So now what?" Windser said. "He probably needs medical attention."

"I told you to scare him away, not hurt him!"

"He was going for his weapon. What was I supposed to do?"

Hanaver shrugged.

"And he was trespassing," Windser pointed out.

"Like *that's* never happened before," Hanaver said. "You gonna attack every lightskin who violates the treaty?"

"Treaty," Windser scoffed. "They get everything, we get cheap narcotics and a shitty betting parlor."

They stared down at Jakk.

"Maybe we should kill him," Hanaver said. "Just for the hell of it."

Then they cringed and covered their ears as the canyon was filled with a prolonged and terrible shrieking. The noise caromed off the stone and amplified itself, burning into their brains like a malignancy.

Looking around in fear and dread, Hanaver spotted a raggedy creature in heavy black robes staggering in the youths' direction.

"It's the pedophile!" she said.

"Run!" Windser screamed.

They ran. One of them smacked into Eighty-eight and knocked him off his feet. By the time the black-robed creature reached Jakk, the youths were long gone.

2

The shriek-monster stopped its awful noise-making. It knelt next to Jakk, casting a menacing shadow over him.

From her spot behind the skimmer, Lita re-calculated the odds of Jakk getting killed or maimed to be 99.9990%. This she found reassuring. Primarily because it meant that soon she would have the boot fob she needed to operate the skimmer. Secondly because it suggested that her initial calculations had been inaccurate not due to a processor malfunction or a programming glitch, as she had feared, but to a failure to account for this new variable, one she couldn't have known about. This horrible Thing in black robes that was, even at this moment, extending one of its sinister claws toward the unconscious young man's head.

She tittered in anticipation of Jakk getting his face torn off. Then she wished she'd muted her speakers.

The shriek-monster paused. It raised its misshapen head and turned its glaring red eyes in Lita's direction.

It smiled gruesomely.

"Oh, hello," it said, in a deceptively pleasant voice.

The creature rose. Lita executed a procedure call to her murder subroutine.

"You can come out, if you want," the shriek-monster said. "Nothing to fear."

Lita had shipped with superior lie detector software, and though she may have been out of date, the software was not. According to it, the Thing was not lying. According to other software, it was not armed.

She recalibrated her optical sensors. The shriek-monster became a grizzled old man. Its head was no longer misshapen -- that was the hood of its robe -- and its glaring red eyes were now a soft, inviting brown. What had once appeared to be a claw now resembled a well-aged human hand, perhaps in need of a manicure.

Lita stepped out from behind the skimmer.

"Pleased to meet you," the old man said.

His smile remained gruesome, the teeth discolored and misaligned.

Jakk stirred and moaned. Lita made a fretting sound. She'd missed her chance to get the boot fob.

The old man misinterpreted her concern. "Don't worry," he said. "He'll be all right."

Lita muted her speakers and cursed.

3

Jakk sat up groggily. "What happened?"

"No sudden movements, now," the old man said. "You took a pretty good knock."

Jakk's face lit up. "Xen!"

Lita unmuted herself. Xen Watanabi?

"That's me," Xen said.

Before Lita could continue Jakk cut her off.

"You saved me from those savages! How did you happen be out here?"

"Oh, you know," Xen said. "Sometimes things just work out a certain way."

"And what's even odder is that we were talking about you just this morning, and now here you are."

"That is odd. What were you saying about me, if you don't mind my asking. I hope it wasn't to do with those vicious rumors."

"Oh, uh, no," Jakk said. "No, of course not. I don't even know which rumors you're talking about."

"Good, then. Don't believe anything you read on the network."

"No, I never thought you were a pedophile. No way."

"Pedophile?" Xen said, his face darkening. "Who's saying that?"

"Uh, nobody. What? Listen, Xen," Jakk quickly went on, "this android, Lita, says she needs to find Hiro Watanabi. Is that someone you know?"

Xen smiled. "Yes, Jakk, it's safe to say Hiro and I know each other. Quite well, as a matter of fact. Very well, you might say."

"My uncle says he's dead," Jakk said, trying not to look at Xen's teeth.

"Extremely well."

"So he's not dead?"

"I'm not dead, Jakk," Xen said.

"Right, but what about--"

Lita squealed in frustration.

"Right!" Jakk said. "Of course!" He frowned at Xen. "So why couldn't you just say so?"

"One wants a hint of elegance, you know."

Mister Watanabi, Lita interjected. I must show you a message from the Princess.

Xen's expression grew sober. "The Princess?"

They were interrupted by the distant roars of several large beasts. Distant, but not too distant.

"Maggos," Xen said. "That means the n'aT'i've's are nearby."

"Who?" Jakk asked.

"Perhaps we should continue our conversation at my home," Xen said, offering Jakk a knowing look.

"Uh...sure."

"Before the savages realize they have us cornered and outnumbered?"

"Ohhh," Jakk said. "Right."

"It's a sad state of affairs," the old man said, "when every mysterious old man who keeps close tabs on a handsome boy gets labeled a pedophile."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

1

They hoisted the sleeping Eighty-eight into the skimmer, got in themselves, and took off, with Xen driving. Lita powered up her companion and greeted him when he came online.

"Why is my arm not attached to my chassis?" Eighty-eight asked.

You got knocked over.

"Good lord. I don't even have to be conscious to suffer."

But we found Hiro!

Eighty-eight had a look at the grizzled old man hunched over the skimmer's controls, straining with ancient eyes to steer them to safety.

"Great. Our savior."

2

Xen's home was a stone hut on the opposite side of the n'aT'i've' reservation. He led the others inside and bade them make themselves comfortable. He had nothing the androids might have wanted -- not even a power supply -- but he was able to offer Jakk some tea.

"It's a special blend I buy in Falsum," Xen said. "You really should try it, Jakk. The taste is" -- he faltered -- "an acquired one. But it will help you recover from your injury."

"I don't know," Jakk said. "How horrible is it?"

"Oh, no, it doesn't taste bad. It simply doesn't have much flavor. That's why I take mine with lots of sucrose," Xen explained, and then out came the smile again, like a mouthful of rocks.

"Thanks," Jakk said, "but I'm feeling a lot better."

Lita was anxious to show Hiro the message from the Princess. However Eighty-eight insisted that she re-attach his arm first. She grudgingly attended to this task while Jakk peppered Hiro with questions about the father he'd never known.

"But he wasn't in the military. He captained a merchant vessel."

"Who told you that?" Xen asked. "Your uncle?"

"Are you saying it isn't true?"

"Your father and I fought alongside each other."

"You were in the Drone Wars?"

"Both of us, yes. We were Star Knights, Jakk. Part of the ancient and elite order pledged to protect the galaxy at the cost of our very lives."

Jakk said, "Huh."

The androids swiveled their heads to look at him.

"Our reputation precedes us," Xen commented. "Well, no matter. It was a long time ago and the galaxy has moved on, I suppose."

"I still can't believe you knew my dad," Jakk said.

"He was the best pilot I've ever seen, and a great warrior, and a good friend. For a while, at least."

Jakk perked up. "What happened?"

"Oh," Xen said, averting his eyes. "Well. Perhaps we shouldn't get into that just now." Brightly he added, "I just remembered that I have something for you."

Xen crossed the room and opened a battered wooden trunk. He took something out, brought it back to his seat, and offered it to Jakk. It was a metal cylinder, gleaming black.

"Your father asked me...in so many words...to give this to you when the time was right. I would have done it earlier, but your aunt and uncle objected. They were probably worried you'd cut off your arms and legs like-- They were probably afraid you'd hurt yourself."

"Morons." Jakk took the cylinder. "What is it?"

"Your father's laser sword. The weapon of choice for all Star Knights."

Jakk found a button on the cylinder and pressed it, producing a meter-long white beam. "Cool," he said.

"For a thousand generations," Xen said, "or was it a thousand and five? Something like that. For many solar cycles the Star Knights maintained order in the People's Democratic Republic of the Galaxy. This was before the troubles, you understand. Before the Incorporated Planets cast its dark shadow over us all."

"Huh." Jakk switched off the sword.

"Not a student of history, I see."

"So how did my dad die?"

"Put it this way: a young man called Brace Pulsar -- terrible name, but we won't dwell on it -- this fellow, a student of mine, I'm afraid to say, turned to evil and then helped the IP hunt down and kill the Star Knights. He betrayed and...more or less...murdered your father. And now," Xen went on, before Jakk could interject, "the Knights are practically extinct, all because Brace, who is currently President of the IP, was corrupted by the absolute form of the Power."

"Corrupted, huh? Sounds pretty badass. What else can you tell me about this guy?"

Xen leaned closer to Jakk and stared into his eyes. His voice was deeper and more resonant when he said, "You'd like to hear more about the Power and less about Brace Pulsar."

A glaze formed over Jakk's eyes. "I'd like to hear more about the Power, and less about--"

Xen leaned back, looking satisfied. His voice returned to its normal pitch. "The Power is what gives a Star Knight his special abilities. It's a form of energy generated by everything in the galaxy. It permeates all matter and influences all interactions."

Jakk blinked. His eyes lost that glazed-over look. "Interesting."

Xen grinned.

"So where do midichlorians come in?"

The grin disappeared.

"I remember seeing a vid about them on the network," Jakk explained.

"You must clear your mind of such pseudo-scientific claptrap," Xen said.

4

The arm is done, Lita said.

"Done-ish," Eighty-eight said, flexing the joint.

Can I show you the video now? Lita asked Xen.

"Yes, let's see."

Lita's optical sensors lit up and the hologram appeared in front of her.

"Hiro Watanabi," the Princess said, "long ago you fought ruthlessly in the Drone Wars. Now the Activists need your help in their struggle to overthrow the fascists of the Incorporated Planets. I have transferred data critical to the survival of Activism onto the hard drive of this android."

"See that, honey?" Eighty-eight whispered to Lita. "Didn't even call you by name. She was using you!"

"You must transport it safely to Aventus," Kia went on, "where my mother lives. She'll know what to do with the data. Help us, Hiro Watanabi. We have nowhere else to turn."

The image of the Princess's pleading face lingered for a moment. Then her features straightened out and she said, "Was that all right? Or should we do another take?"

The hologram disappeared.

Xen leaned back in his seat, a ruminative look on his face. Jakk watched him and waited.

"Come with me to Aventus, Jakk."

"I don't even know what that is."

"Not a student of astronomy, either, hm? Nonetheless, I need your help. Activism needs your help. And the princess...well...certainly *she* needs your help."

Jakk's gorge rose and he covered his mouth with his hands.

"Boyfriend has issues," Eighty-eight said.

"Yes, come to think of it, I suppose he would," said Xen.

Elaborate, Lita requested.

"Another time, perhaps."

"It's all right," Jakk said, panting. "I'm okay now."

"And your answer is...?"

"My answer's no. Did you see what just happened to me? I can't get anywhere near that woman. Plus, if I leave Marty and Genny now I'll never hear the end of it. Their powers of guilt are beyond anything you can imagine. Speaking of which, what I am gonna tell those two when we get back?"

"Listen, Jakk," Xen said. "To hell with your aunt and uncle. They've been holding you back your whole life. Come with me. Make something of yourself. Forge a new path. You can be my student, just like--"

Jakk shot the old man an inquisitive look.

"It'll be the adventure of a lifetime!" Xen concluded.

Jakk got up and paced. He stopped and turned to Xen with a sigh.

"Part of me really wants to go with you, Xen. I've dreamt about an opportunity like this. But as long as my aunt and uncle are here, I have to stay and be a loser like them."

Xen changed his voice again, and stared at Jakk intently. "I'm sure you'll change your mind."

Jakk's eyes glazed over. "Nah, I doubt it," he said. "And could you please not look at me like that? I'm not great about eye contact."

"Er, of course," said Xen. "My apologies."

"We should get moving. I'm gonna go boot up the skimmer."

The old man watched the younger one go.

"Well," Xen said with wounded pride. "I suppose I'm out of practice."

5

"Did you hear that?" Eighty-eight asked Lita, after Jakk left. "'No eye contact.' Plus the way he acts? He's on the spectrum, honey. I'd bet you anything."

It would explain a lot, Lita agreed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

1

Many light years away, the IP's newest and greatest product -- "a once in a generation phenomenon, a true game-changer," in the words of the Chairman -- had just officially come online. It was a sword shining in the darkness. A beacon of light cutting through the murk of despair. It was the ultimate security solution, the harbinger of hope, the guarantor of galactic peace. The answer to the encroachments of Activism.

It was not a space station.

It was...the Defense Star.

Development and construction of the Defense Star had occurred over many solar cycles and at enormous cost. The platform was a triumph of engineering, logistics and finance.

And yet the most impressive aspect of the product's creation was that it had taken place in near-total secrecy. The average citizen knew nothing of this project. Searching the network for "Defense Star" resulted in zero matches. Everyone who was in any way involved in the planning, building or operations of the platform had signed a non-disclosure agreement, and those millions of agreements had been enforced.

To the extent that there was any information available, it could only be found on the darknet, which could be thought of as the network's pain-in-the-ass younger sibling, always asking too many questions, sporting too many opinions and spreading its filth on everything it touched⁷.

The darknet was difficult to access and even harder to navigate. It was frequented by criminals, perverts, politicians, terrorists and, worst of all, writers.

2

⁷ I am an only child, but thanks for asking.

The Defense Star was star-like in name only. It more closely resembled an IP space defender expanded to 50 times its size and turned sideways. It could also have been mistaken for a floating city, which is fine by me because floating cities are pretty frakking cool. #Gernsback

To defeat prying eyes and sensors, the Defense Star was assembled and beta-tested in a remote nebula. It was toward this massive cloud of cosmic dust that the President and his guest, the Princess, were headed aboard *Exceptionalist*.

3

IP Secretary of Defense Geev Stobbs viewed the Defense Star as his long career's crowning achievement. He had not conceived, designed, planned or built the platform, but he had schemed, manipulated, politicked and bullied his way to the top of the long list of individuals seeking glory for the success of the venture.

The masterstroke in this campaign came when Stobbs convinced the Chairman that the entire Division of Defense could and should be headquartered in the Defense Star. It made good sense in terms of strategic imperatives and costs, and it had the added benefit of weakening Stobbs' primary rival, Brace Pulsar. Security protocol forbade the President and the Secretary of Defense from being based on the same vessel, and the Chairman did not think it wise to make an exception.

Brace was assigned control of the fleet, with the IP's most formidable space defender as his command ship. But Stobbs got the Defense Star. Just as he had hoped, the Secretary's name would forever be associated with this revolutionary piece of technology.

And now, with all systems go and launch of the product imminent, Stobbs sat in his cavernous office and let himself relax a little bit. Finally he could enjoy the rewards of all his lying, browbeating and backstabbing.

Then a computer voice announced two visitors and just like that it was time to get back to work. The Secretary frowned at the door as it opened to admit two young officers, Commanders Urit and Epp. Each looked agitated, and their body language suggested they couldn't stand each other.

"Gentlemen," Stobbs said, in disregard of the fact that Epp was female. "What can I do for you?"

"The network notice, Mister Secretary," Urit said.

"What about it?"

"It's done," Epp said brightly.

"Mister Secretary, it's not," Urit countered.

Stobbs arched an eyebrow.

"It doesn't make any sense!" Urit spat out.

"Why don't we let the Secretary decide?" Epp said. She used a hand-held device to project the text of the network notice in front of Stobbs. Yellow words, set against a black background, scrolled slowly forward and seemed to recede into the distance.

Stobbs read: "Secretary of Defense Geev Stobbs and the Incorporated Planets are proud to announce the launch of the Defense Star, a bleeding-edge consumer platform with enough high-end functionality to penetrate any market."

"That part!" Urit exclaimed. "What the hell does that even mean? I thought this thing was a...I don't know, some kind of a space station."

"Hah!" Epp said.

Stobbs looked at her coldly. "Well, Commander: What *does* it mean?"

Epp stood up straighter and stopped smiling. "Sorry?"

"Commander Urit doesn't understand what you've written. Please explain it to him. In terms suited to a mental deficient."

Neither officer seemed pleased with the way this was going.

"Well, ah," Epp began, "what I would say is, the Defense Star...leverages our core competencies in the security space and serves to bootstrap stakeholder consumables by monetizing churn as part of the end-user experience."

"He'll never understand that," Stobbs said. "Will you, Urit?"

Urit's non-response was the best response he could manage.

"Do you understand it?" the Secretary asked Epp.

Panic wriggled across her face and was quickly displaced by a grin so wide it must have hurt. "Of course I do," she said unconvincingly.

"It sounds to me," Stobbs said with gravity, "as if the two of you would benefit from..."

They cringed.

"...a team building exercise."

Epp lowered her head in shame. Urit squared his shoulders and lifted his chin in a swell of outrage. Then he burst into tears.

"Now be gone," Stobbs said, "before you can embarrass me in front of the President."

4

"Mister President," Stobbs said, showing his teeth.

"Mister Secretary."

"Congratulations. The Princess eluded you for a long time but you did, at last, capture her."

Brace nodded.

"And soon you'll have recovered the stolen data as well," Stobbs said.

"Correct?"

The President's blue eyes narrowed the slightest bit. "That's right. Which means now we can focus on more important matters."

Stobbs did his thing with the eyebrow.

"You'll be happy to know," the President said, "that the Board of Directors has been dissolved by the Chairman. The last remnants of the bloated and corrupt bureaucracy have been swept away."

"Interesting. How will the Chairman operate without the Board?"

"The regional vice presidents will assume direct control over their business units. Performance-based incentives will keep them aligned with our mission, vision and values."

"And of course," Stobbs said, "there's the Defense Star to handle the Activists and any other outliers. Presuming you recover the data."

"It seems cause for concern," Brace said, "that the Secretary of Defense shows so little faith in his own peacekeeping forces."

"Truthfully, it's no matter. This," said Stobbs, spreading his arms wide, "is what matters. Any denial-of-service attack made by the Activists against this platform would be a useless gesture, no matter how much of the source code they've obtained. Our systems are monitored by the microsecond and we have tens of thousands of specialists on constant alert, ready to identify and defeat threats before they can amount to anything. We are invulnerable."

The President's eyes glinted. "Understood, Mister Secretary. But I'd caution you against overconfidence. This technology is superior, no doubt. But it pales in comparison to the force of the Power."

"Fah! With all due respect, sir, there will be no place in the world we are creating for ancient rites and superstitions. Your faith in the Power hasn't returned the data. Nor has it gotten you any closer to finding the Activists' secret lair. Has it?"

Brace said nothing.

"Has it?" Stobbs repeated, before he was overcome by a coughing fit. Just little hiccupy coughs at first, a mere annoyance. But instead of dissipating they grew worse. The Secretary hacked and gasped for breath. His face turned red and he bent forward in his chair, gripping its arms with whitened knuckles.

"Something I can do?" the President asked.

Eyes bulging, throat rasping, Stobbs lifted his head to look at Brace with imploring eyes. "P-p-please!" he sputtered.

The coughing subsided. Slowly. Stobbs' grip on the chair relaxed. His face regained its natural pallor.

He sat up, and looked up, and saw the President staring at him.

"The Power works in strange ways, Mister Secretary."

Stobbs smoothed his thin hair against his skull. "Indeed," he said quietly.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

1

Tanix's blazing white-yellow sun had climbed high into the sky. Midday would arrive soon.

Outside Xen's hut, the skimmer stood ready. Jakk stood next to it, but ready he was not. "Whoever's coming with me," he called testily toward the hut, "get a frakking move on."

Xen emerged from the door, followed by the androids.

"Lita intends to stay with me," the old man replied.

"And, uh, me too," Eighty-eight said, cringing in anticipation of Jakk's reaction. "My lord," he added, for good measure.

Lita gave her friend a look. "Hush," Eighty-eight said.

Jakk kicked at the sandy ground. "Great," he moped. "More good news for Marty and Genny."

"I can see you're conflicted," Xen said. "Even this place can grow on a person, make him resistant to change."

"It's not any of that," Jakk said, turning away from them. "I'm a coward, really. All talk, no action. I'm miserable here but I don't have the courage to try something new. It's easier to complain and act like a jerk. I guess those are the only things I'm good at."

"Amen to that," Eighty-eight said quietly.

Ignoring the android Xen said, "Your candor is, well, I suppose 'admirable' doesn't quite cover it..."

Jakk turned around, a hopeful expression on his face. "Badass? Super badass?"

"Extremely candid, shall we say."

"His candor is candid?" Eighty-eight said, but then it was Lita's turn to hush him.

"What about this," Xen went on. "I will go back with you. I'll talk to your aunt and uncle. If I can convince them that you should come with me, then perhaps you'll have an easier decision. Does that seem fair?"

"Doesn't really address anything I just said," Jakk mused. "But yeah, sure. I don't think you know who you're up against, but hey, have at it."

"Oh, I don't know," Xen said. His eyes gleamed and his laser sword materialized in his hand as if by magic. "I believe they will find me highly...persuasive."

Eighty-eight turned to Lita. "We came to this hellscape for *him*?"

Oh yes, Lita said.

2

To avoid any more n'aT'i'v'e's they took a circuitous route toward the Slough homestead. All went well until they neared the Cazzereen Pass.

"Whoa," Jakk said, reducing the skimmer's speed. "Somebody got *frakked up*."

Maggos were large, long-snouted, big-eared creatures often used for transportation in the desert. Near where Jakk stopped were the carcasses of at least a dozen maggos that had been blasted to bloody pieces. All that remained of one animal were four severed leg stumps.

Along with dead maggos there were dead peacekeepers, at least 20 of them. The sun glinted harshly off their blood-stained white armor. Body parts were strewn everywhere. Far overhead the first scavengers were beginning to circle.

"We should stop," Xen said.

"Do you really think anyone's still alive?" Jakk asked.

"There might be weapons we can claim for the cause."

Lita nudged Eighty-eight and smiled.

"That's enough," he said.

Jakk parked the skimmer and everyone got out.

Eighty-eight turned away from the horror show, marched off a good distance, and then stood there with his back to it all. Jakk stumbled around like a kid at a carnival, awed by the spectacle of violence. Xen, by contrast, was unfazed and clinical. He navigated the scene methodically, ignoring the dead, seeking out items of value. Lita trailed him like a faithful pet.

"Obviously the natives did this," Jakk said. "There are two groups of maggo tracks, one for the natives, one for the peacekeepers. Bold frakking move, killing peacekeepers."

"But these blast marks weren't made by n'aT'i'v'e' rifles," Xen said. "They were the work of Fidush weapons."

Lita concurred. Not that the humans noticed.

"Why would Fidushi go after peacekeepers? Isn't that asking for big trouble?"

Xen rubbed his jaw. "The peacekeepers must have been looking for your androids. Word must have gotten back to the Fidushi that the androids were a lot more valuable than they realized. And everyone knows how ruthless Fidushi are when it comes to business."

"I knew they were tough, but this...this is *awesome*."

Jakk looked to Xen for a reaction. The old man only regarded Jakk expectantly.

"But wait. If the Fidushi are still looking for the androids..."

"Yes?" Xen said.

"And if they killed the peacekeepers to prevent them from getting the androids...and now they're still looking for the androids...and the last place they saw them was..."

Jakk screwed up his face, concentrating furiously.

"Yes?" Xen said impatiently.

"HOLY FRAKK!" Jakk cried. He sprinted back to the skimmer, and jumped in, and took off.

"Would you like to take a weapon?" Xen called after him.

4

Billowing smoke would have guided Jakk to the homestead even if he hadn't known the coordinates. Ragged columns of it stained the horizon as the young man pushed the skimmer's engine to its limit.

Arriving on the scene, Jakk covered his mouth and nose against the smoke and waded into the destruction.

The Fidushi had done a very thorough job of it. Every structure, every vehicle, every piece of equipment no matter how trivial had either been obliterated or set ablaze.

"Uncle Marten!" Jakk called, risking smoke inhalation. "Aunt Geniver!"

He staggered from one domed roof to the next, looking for any trace of his guardians. After several minutes he grew weak from breathing poisoned air. He dropped to all fours and crawled away from the maelstrom.

That was when he spotted the ghastly remains of his uncle and aunt, on the ground next to a burning transport.

From the look of things they'd been crawling away too, hoping to reach the vehicle before the flames took it. Instead they had been massacred, the skin peeled from their bodies, their bones liquified.⁸

Jakk stared at this tableau for a long time. His face was covered with soot and sweat.

He struggled to stand.

⁸ It's like poetry. It rhymes.

Slowly shifting his feet he did a complete 360, taking in the total annihilation of everything he had ever known. At last his eyes settled on the corpses again. His face contorted.

He pumped his fist and cried "YES!"

5

Over at the site of the first Fidushi massacre, Xen and the androids didn't know what to do with all the dead peacekeepers and maggots.

"I'll be damned if I'm going to ennoble these jackbooted thugs by giving them a proper burial," Xen said. "Not that such a thing could even be managed, in the sand."

Agreed, Lita said. Let them rot!

"Aren't we vehement," commented Eighty-eight.

"As for the poor dumb beasts," Xen said, "I don't think we have time..."

He trailed off and lifted his head, as if to sniff the air. After a moment he shuddered lightly, in a way that was closer to ecstatic than frightful, as some kind of wave passed over him, through him. Then, with a look of great satisfaction, Xen glanced off in the direction Jakk had gone.

"Very well then," he said, greatly pleased.

"What is it?" asked Eighty-eight.

"The Power has spoken to me. Our young friend has cast off his chains. He is no longer bound to this infernal planet. He is ready to join our cause, and to become a Star Knight like-- To come with us to Aventus. Heh."

You keep doing that, Lita said.

"I'm a forgetful old man, it seems."

"So wait," Eighty-eight said. "Does this news about Jakk mean that Marten and Geniver...?"

"Pah," Xen said. "Ask someone who cares."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

1

While the President and Secretary Stobbs were meeting in another part of the Defense Star, twelve peacekeepers were charged with escorting Kia to her suite. They were a special ops unit, the elite of the elite.

"Hello, boys," Kia said, taking the measure of the squad, which faced her in rows of three. "I'd wave but..." She gestured futilely with her manacled hands.

There was a throat-clearing noise from somewhere in the back.

"Girls too? How very progressive of the IP."

Kia craned her neck to see. All of the peacekeepers looked essentially the same in their company-issued armor and helmets, but one of them, in the last row, might have been a little smaller than her squad mates. In any event it was that one who nodded, almost imperceptibly, at the Princess.

"Okay then," Kia said. "Let's see what horrors the President has in store for me."

They surrounded her and marched her down a corridor.

The female peacekeeper was the first one Kia attacked. She killed that one and another before a stun shot took her down.

2

She came to in the quarters the President had chosen for her.

"Oh god," she said after a glimpse at her surroundings.

She was lying on a regal bed in an expansive, low-lit room. When she sat up the light level automatically increased. Soothing music -- a popular song from her home world of Aventus -- played softly in the background.

The room represented a level of opulence that was beyond the reach of 99.9% of the galactic population. The sheets on the bed were made of Athrom silk, whose quality, it was said, had no equal, and whose price, it was also said, could only be expressed in units of exhilaration.

Fantastically intricate Drona rugs decorated the floor. Every piece of furniture had been hand-crafted from rare Jirago hardwood. On a long table in the middle of the room was an assortment of gourmet foods from across the galaxy. And at one end of the table sat chilling no fewer than three bottles of Hador Ghi, a drink so exquisite that it could not be described as anything other than itself.

Kia scooted off the bed. When her feet touched the floor the room's CPU initiated a hospitality procedure. There was a polite tapping on the door and then in came an android, a light-skinned, later-model version of 88-XOR.

"Greetings, Princess," he said, with the perfect balance of cheeriness and formality. "Please don't try to escape, as that will trigger vents in this room and the next one to immediately remove all air."

Kia stopped in mid-spring. She relaxed and waited for the android to go on.

"As an android I'm useless as a hostage. No one will bargain with you for my release. Also, I have no weapons or access to weapons, and I can't unlock anything on the Defense Star, unless you count those bottles of Hador Ghi."

He paused so that she could chuckle, and he was unfazed when she didn't.

"Therefore you have nothing to gain from harming me, and much to gain from hearing me out."

"Go on, then," she said, regretting she'd missed the training on how to turn an android into a bomb.

"The President will be with you shortly. It is his hope that, while you wait, you'll avail yourself of whichever of our amenities most suit you."

"Hah! Thinks he can bribe me with luxury."

"If the buffet is not to your liking I can arrange for any dish of your choosing to be prepared. You can stream content from the network--"

"Never!"

"I can also offer you a massage. Any style, any length, clothed or unclothed--"

"Frakk off!" Kia grabbed the nearest thing at hand, which was a lamp that cost more than some spaceships, and then she cocked her arm.

"If it's sexual satisfaction you seek," the android said, "I can be whatever you need me to be. Male, female, sub, dom..."

The Princess paused. Her lips twitched.

"I'm capable of over 4,000 configurations," the android added.

"Nice try, but no," Kia said. She drew her arm all the way back and threw the lamp at the android. He ducked and the expensive artifact shattered against the door.

"Please don't waste your time trying to hit me," the android said. "My reflexes are superior."

"Well aren't you frakking special." Kia picked up one of the bottles of Hador Ghi, turned away from the android, and threw the bottle against the wall, where it was transformed into a spray of liquid and glass.

"What in the *hell* did you do that for?" the android cried.

"If I think of a reason you'll be the first to know," Kia said, reaching for another bottle.

She remembered trashing the room. By the end it looked as if she *had* figured out how to turn the android into a bomb. But no: she was the bomb. And it'd been fun.

She remembered the android. His coder clearly had not anticipated anything like an encounter with Kia. The android could only watch as the room was reduced to rubble. Then he balled himself up in a corner and powered down.

She remembered the vents humming to life and she remembered wondering if it meant the end for her. But instead of air being removed from the room, some new gas was added. A sedative, apparently, because she didn't remember anything after that.

The next thing she knew she was in a different room. Lying in a new bed. One whose Athrom silk sheets had not been ripped to shreds, whose mattress hadn't been punctured with shards of Jirago wood.

And Brace Pulsar was standing over her.

"Congratulations," the President said. "You've been upgraded."

Kia sat up quickly and slid away from him. He didn't try to get any closer.

"We built this room in anticipation of having high-profile visitors with bad manners. Everything secured, nothing breakable. We call it the celebrity suite."

Kia's blue eyes stared defiantly into Brace's own. "I was wondering when you'd show up to torture me."

"We both know that's not going to happen."

"Liar."

"Thief."

"Corporate lackey."

"Activist."

"Frakkwad."

Brace started to say something, but he caught himself and turned away. Before he did Kia thought she saw something, a flicker in his eyes, a spark of humanity.

"This is ridiculous," he said.

"So when does the torture start?" she asked.

He turned to face her. "There is no place for that in this galaxy."

Kia hopped off the bed. She tugged experimentally on one of the pillows but even that had somehow been tied down.

"Not what I hear, Mister President."

"I have an offer for you: Full amnesty for all Activists. No repercussions."

"In exchange for what?"

"I won't ask you for the stolen data because I know they're with those androids on Tanix."

Kia's face revealed nothing.

"I'll have the data soon enough. What I want now is the location of your secret lair."

"No way. Our forces are the last remaining obstacle in the Chairman's path to dictatorship."

"Why is it that any leader you don't support gets labeled a fascist?"

"Why is it that the Chairman has been in power since before I was born?"

"YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT," each of them told the other. Not just at the same time, and in the same words, but with the same tone of voice, even the same inflections.

Weird.

They paused to regroup.

"Give me the location and the fighting ends," Brace said. "We'll even reinstate the Board."

"The Chairman will never go for that."

"I can sell it to him."

"He doesn't give a damn what you think."

"I'm the President of the entire frakking galaxy."

Kia scoffed. "You're his errand boy."

"DAMN it!" Brace said, cornering her, looming over her. His right hand, consciously or not, went to the hilt of his laser sword. "Tell me where that base is!"

"Or WHAT? Torture?"

In the blink of an eye he whirled and ignited the sword and sliced the bed in half. It collapsed awkwardly.

"Whoa," Kia said.

"Shit," Brace said. "I'll have to expense that." He turned off his sword and put it away. He looked at the Princess.

"You're making this extremely difficult. Many have died and many more will die if we don't end this uprising. I'll keep you here as long as the courts will let me, which will be a very long time given the sheer volume of evidence against you. Without its leader Activism is doomed. You'll have nothing to do but sit around while it fizzles out. Is that what you want?"

"What I want is irrelevant. The cause is bigger than me or you or the entire IP."

She stepped up close to Brace and jabbed a finger at him. "And there is nothing, NOTHING, you can do to make me cooperate."

It was a standoff. They glared at each other.

Finally Brace said, "I think you're wrong, Princess. I believe there *is* something I can do." And with that he turned his back on her and headed to the door.

"Is it torture?" Kia called after him.

"IT'S NOT FRAKKING TORTURE!" Brace said. "I WILL NEVER ALLOW YOU TO BE TORTURED!" He disappeared through the door and it slammed shut with a resounding metallic thunk.

"Well *that* sucks," Kia said. She'd been feeling all tingly at the prospect of a good laser peel, or a little glorbstacking.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

1

Geniver and Marten Slough hadn't believed in banks. The money they'd been saving on Jakk's behalf, the money that was to put him through the Academy -- Tanix Agricultural Academy, the planet's premier farming program -- had been hidden in one of their silos. It had burned up with everything else.

"So you have no money," Xen said. "And I have only a little. The Star Knights' credit union was liquidated along with the Knights themselves."

They were standing by the skimmer. Minutes ago Jakk had returned from the ruins of the homestead, and now he and Xen were planning their next move. Meanwhile the androids were arranging dead peacekeepers in one pile and dead maggots in another. There was no rationale for this. Eighty-eight and Lita were just bored.

"If we can't buy ourselves a ship we'll have to pay someone to take us to Aventus," Xen said. "Which means we must go to Rozan Jerus."

"The capital city. Wow. I've never been there, have you?"

"I have."

"Is it everything people say it is?"

"You will never find a more sordid collection of lowlifes and malefactors."

Jakk gasped a little.

"I only wish we could spend more time there," Xen added. "I'd love to take you out on the town."

2

The trip through the wastelands was long and dull. They didn't reach the city limits until sunset.

Rozan Jerus was a gleaming facade with little of substance behind it. When the last of the planet's hydrocarbons had been extracted much of the city's population had been forced to leave in search of work.

Hydrocarbon revenues had paid for the construction of a forest of architecturally impressive buildings. Many of these now sat empty.

Of the citizens who remained, a slim majority were employed by either the government or the spaceport. The less fortunate lived in poverty or turned to crime. Their numbers were rising steadily.

The only growth industry in the city was entertainment. The network's appetite for content was insatiable, and certain providers had discovered that it was easier and cheaper to imitate existing work than to create new material.

Rozan Jerus, recognizing an opportunity, had ~~ended~~ relaxed its enforcement of anti-plagiarism laws. There followed an influx of "creative types."

City officials were pleased to have a new source of tax revenue. The poor and the criminal class complained about all the scumbags moving in.

3

"Slow down a bit, please," Xen said to Jakk.

Up ahead of them, at one of the main entrances to the city, a checkpoint had been established. Peacekeepers were examining every incoming vehicle.

"The IP beat us here. Well, no matter."

"But what if they recognize the androids?" Jakk said.

"Leave this to me."

Jakk resisted the urge to panic as the skimmer approached the checkpoint. Eighty-eight and Lita slouched down in their seats.

"Excuse me, sir," a peacekeeper addressed Jakk. "My apologies for the inconvenience, but we're looking for a pair of androids carrying stolen data. Can I ask how long you've owned these two?"

Xen leaned over. There was a stern look on his face. "Listen, friend, you had better back off or I will be contacting the civil liberties guild. Do you understand?"

"Sorry...what?" the peacekeeper said.

"You heard me," the old man said, his voice full of indignation.

"Look, I'm just doing my--"

"Why have you singled us out for this interrogation?" He nodded at Jakk. "Do you discriminate against the young? Or the old, like myself? Is it because we're *men*?"

"I haven't--" the peacekeeper stammered. "We're asking everybody!"

"LIES!" Xen thundered. "Are you *prejudiced* against dark-skinned androids? Is *that* what this is about?"

"Well, actually--"

"THESE ARE NOT THE ANDROIDS YOU'RE LOOKING FOR."

The scene had attracted an audience by now, and the peacekeeper was clearly mortified by the attention.

"Not unless you want to spend the rest of your life in litigation," Xen said.

The crowd, even the other peacekeepers among it, murmured appreciatively. Xen nodded to them.

"Now," he went on, "can my companions and I go about our business, or do I need to remind you that a civil judgment against you could result in NEGATIVE PERFORMANCE REVIEWS, GARNISHED WAGES, and even TERMINATED EMPLOYMENT?!"

"Go, go," the peacekeeper said, waving his arms.

"Move along," Xen told Jakk.

"Move along, move along," the peacekeeper pleaded.

4

The skimmer darted into the city. Jakk put some distance between themselves and the checkpoint and then he pulled over.

He looked at Xen with new-found respect. "How the hell did you do that?"

"I wouldn't mind knowing, either," Eighty-eight said.

Lita simply gazed at the old man in adoration.

"The Power is a great ally, Jakk. But since my facility with it has weakened, I turned to an equally great ally: bluster."

"I guess I'll keep it in mind."

"Good. And now we must find the seediest bar in town. In my experience, that's where all the off-duty pilots congregate."

"What exactly are we looking for in a pilot?"

"One who isn't drunk yet."

CHAPTER TWENTY

1

The Hil District had once been Rozan Jerus's most exciting neighborhood. Musicians from across the galaxy vied for gigs in the Hil's many nightclubs, and creatures of all varieties -- so long as they were young and had money -- streamed into the neighborhood every night to dance, dine and drink up a storm.

It was fantastic while it lasted. The reason it didn't last longer was Ednys Rand.

He was an entrepreneur who sold the city on the idea of building a sports arena in the Hil District. He'd just bought a team and they needed a place to play. Rand was also promising to share the new building's revenues with key officials. Which was, technically, against the law, but no matter: one of the officials was the head of law enforcement.

The city invoked eminent domain to grant Rand possession of the neighborhood. Businesses and homeowners were forced out. The arena went up and became the home of Rand's team. In reference to the n'aT'i'v'e' peoples who had been displaced from these lands before Rozan Jerus ever existed, he named the team the Red-Faced Child-Killers.

(He also just thought it was a cool name for a team. Like, intimidating.)

Protesters pointed out that n'aT'i'v'e's did not have red faces, and that they did not kill children. Rand then accused the protesters of bigotry -- he never mentioned what kind -- and the whole thing quickly devolved into endless fodder for the discussion forums of the network.

Life went on. The Hil District was now more or less a giant transport lot for the sports arena. Rand's team proved to be a perennial loser. And on the outskirts of Rand's property a smattering of small businesses continued to operate. One of these was a dirty, nasty, no-good bar called FER. It was the place where Xen hoped to find a pilot.

FER stood for Frakk Ednys Rand.

2

Xen led Jakk and the androids through the entrance of the dark, smoke-filled bar. The rank, cacophonous room teemed with all manner of odd creatures. There were numerous aliens as well.

The bartender was mediating a dispute between a pair of Fidushi when he noticed the arrival of Xen and company.

"Hey!" he called to the old man. "They aren't welcome here."

Xen seemed unfazed. "Surely you don't mean the androids."

"That is exactly who I mean," said the bartender. Meanwhile, the bickering Fidushi made threatening gestures at each other.

"You got something against dark-skinned androids?" Jakk asked.

"I don't care what color they are. But the black one's gay, I can tell, and we don't go for that here."

"How in the world could he know that?" Eighty-eight said.

Oh please, Lita replied.

"This is a family establishment," the bartender said, as the Fidushi pair literally clawed each other's eyes out. "The black one and the weird one have to leave."

"We will respect your wishes," Xen said. He glanced meaningfully at the androids, who got the hint and turned to go.

Weird one? Lita said.

"He doesn't know the half of it," Eighty-eight told her.

Writhing in anger and pain, the blind Fidushi were carried out of the bar by a pair of bouncers.

3

Xen and Jakk remained near the entrance while Xen scanned the room. His questing eye settled on a burly, ursine creature almost as wide as it was tall. It had thick black fur that was starting to go gray.

"A hairy old fellow like myself," Xen commented. "The Power tells me he will be helpful."

He handed Jakk some coins. "Get us a round of drinks, would you? Whatever isn't too dear. I'll go introduce myself."

Jakk stepped up to the bar. The bartender was close by but he ignored Jakk. He was wondering what it would be like to have sex with a black android.

A tall, slobbery, porcine kind of being came right up to Jakk and accosted him. "Nagala dowaghi doolwugger," it said, jabbing Jakk's shoulder with a thick, hoof-like hand.

"What's your frakking problem?" Jakk said.

"Nagala dowaghi doolwugger."

"Yeah, well...doolwugger you too. Now leave me alone."

Another creature appeared behind the first. It was taller, more slobbery, and even uglier than its companion. It looked like a pig whose face had been taken apart and then reassembled incorrectly. It put a calming hand on the first creature, and then it spoke to Jakk.

"Do you understand what you just told him?"

"I look like I speak that shit?"

The second creature smiled. "You said you'd like to marry his daughter."

"What?! No, sorry, uh-uh. Didn't mean that at all. I take it back. Tell him I take it back!"

The first creature grew agitated. The second one hushed him.

"Now you've insulted his daughter."

"Tell him I apologize. To both of them."

"Both of us, you mean," the second creature said.

"Oh shit," Jakk said.

"And what," the second creature went on, with a catch in her fleshy throat, "is so damned crazy about us getting married, I'd like to know."

Her father advanced on Jakk with hooves raised.

"Please excuse my friend," Xen said, putting himself between Jakk and the father. "He's young and rash but he meant no offense."

"Doolwugger!" the pig-thing cried, while his daughter tried to restrain him.

There was a flurry of movement and then a flash. The blade of Xen's laser sword sliced off the heads of father and daughter both. The heads hit the floor with meaty thuds, their expressions frozen in surprise. The bodies remained standing, reeking of charred flesh.

Everyone nearby stared with apprehension at Xen. He sized them up, determined that there would be no need for more violence, and deactivated his sword.

"Well," he said, with a reassuring smile, "it would seem there'll be bacon for everyone tonight."

The crowd buzzed with relief and appreciation. The bartender sent one of the wait staff to tell the cook about the new item on the menu. Xen took Jakk's arm and guided him away from the scene.

"Come, let's finish up here," he told the young man softly, "before they learn how dreadfully awful those things taste."

Outside, a humble stakeholder was making her way to the sports arena for the Red-Faced Child-Killers' game. Passing FER she spotted a pair of dark-skinned androids loitering by the entrance. Now what would they be doing in this neighborhood? Didn't they know they weren't welcome around here?

The taller one noticed her looking and gave a friendly wave. "Hello there," he said.

She wondered what it would be like to have sex with him. Then she returned to her senses.

She didn't like those two hanging around like a pair of narcotics dealers. She nodded politely to them, and then, after she was out of their sight, she called the law enforcement office to make a complaint.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

1

Xen led Jakk down a dim hallway toward a back room of the bar. Waiting for them was the massive bearlike being.

"Jakk," Xen said, "this is Kombardunera. He and his co-pilot can take us to Aventus. Komba, meet Jakk Spacebreaker."

"Hey," Jakk said.

Komba grunted and engulfed Jakk's hand in one of his own.

"Hell of a grip you got there," Jakk said uneasily.

Komba grunted again and then he led them toward the back room.

Seated at the table was a man. Not just any man. If you believed the story about how the Whibmask had created the first man out of cosmic dust (I know, right?), and you believed that *that* fellow had been the paragon, the epitome, the apotheosis of manhood, then you could probably be persuaded that this man hewed closer to that ideal than any of the first man's trillions of descendants. He was that fine.

In keeping with the cosmic dust idea, the man was dressed in shades of charcoal. His boots were scuffed and well-worn. He had piercing dark eyes and a strong jaw lightly dusted with stubble. His frame was lank but sturdy. Not a blemish on his skin, and his hair was absolutely perfect.

"Don Slovack Junior," Don Slovack Jr. said. "Captain of the Terodakta. You want a ride to Aventus?"

"We do," Xen said.

"Captain of the what?" Jakk asked.

"Never heard of the Aeon Terodakta?"

"Oh, that Terodakta. Sure."

"I like you, fella. Remind me of myself at your age."

"Don't call me fella," Jakk said.

"That's exactly what I'm talking about, kid," Don said admiringly.

"We want a fast ship," Xen said, before Jakk could object further.

"We can get you there in 12 parsecs. That fast enough?"

"Hm," Xen said. "For some reason I'd thought a parsec was a unit of distance, not time."

"Well, actually," came a voice from behind them.

They all turned to see who'd spoken. It was a member of the wait staff. A short, thin, furry humanoid wearing thick black goggles. His shirt had a distinctive tartan pattern. He projected a serene self-confidence.

"You're both right," the server said. "A parsec can be a unit of distance or time. The first definition is more widely used. It's only a small, kind of select group that employs the second definition. People like the Captain and me."

He nodded at Don. Slovack nodded back, and tossed the server a coin that made for an extremely generous tip.

"Can I get anyone anything?"

"What we all crave most," Xen said, "is privacy."

"Twelve parsecs is really fast," the server said. "No one can top that."

"Your input is appreciated," Xen replied, and then he waited for the server to leave.

"Smart guy," Don said.

"No doubt," Xen said. "How soon can we leave?"

"Who's we?"

"Myself, the young man...our two androids."

"You're giving off a bit of a furtive vibe. Anybody after you that we need to know about?"

"Possibly."

"Possibly?"

Xen would say no more.

"As long as you're not with the Activists, we're fine," Don said. "I won't do business with terrorists."

"We would never stoop to such depths."

Komba grunted skeptically. Xen ignored it.

"So you want speed *and* discretion," Don said. He looked at Komba and then said: "Cost you ten thousand."

"Are you frakking crazy?" Jakk said. "That's robbery!"

"It's like I'm looking in a mirror at my younger self," Don said admiringly. "What are you, nineteen or so?"

"How'd you know?"

"Exactly! How could I know?"

"Regrettably," Xen said, "we have only 2,000 at hand. What if we were to give you that now and 15,000 more when we get to Aventus?"

"Where will you get the fifteen?"

"From a friend of ours whose name you might know: Princess Kia Sedana?"

Jakk thought about other things and his stomach remained calm.

"The one with the trust fund?" Don said. "I thought she was an Activist."

"Vicious lies propagated by the network, I can assure you."

"Hm. What do you think, Komba?"

Komba nodded.

"Good enough, then," Don said, offering his hand to Xen. "We can leave as soon as you want. Ship's in Lot 49."

"We'll meet you there in an hour," Xen said. "Come, Jakk, we have other business to attend to."

After the pair were gone, Don turned to Komba. "Seventeen thousand! Hot damn! I'll be able to pay off Jinkum."

Komba grunted appreciatively.

"And how about that kid? I swear he's like the son I'll never have."

Komba had no comment.

2

Shortly afterward Komba left the bar. He wanted to run some routine tests on the Aeon Terodakta before the trip to Aventus.

Don passed time nursing his drink and thinking about Princess Kia and her trust fund. If she was as rich as was rumored then she might be persuaded to give to Jinkum's foundation. It would be money for a good cause, it would curry favor for Don. That could only be good for business.

With these pleasant thoughts in his head he got up to leave...

...and then sat right back down.

"Nice to see you again, Don."

Before him stood an old acquaintance: Altrus. Short, green of skin and amphibian-looking, with a throat pouch that bulged and relaxed as he spoke. His watery eyes regarded Don with something like sorrow.

"Do I have good news for you," Don said.

"We're past that point, my friend. You promised Jinkum a donation months ago, and on the basis of that promise he went ahead with plans for the next orphanage. Now there's an angry contractor demanding to be paid and nothing left in the fund."

"Highly unfortunate, I know. But I'm one short passenger run away from being able to keep my promise. I just need a little more time."

"We've given you so much time already, and you've given us nothing. You've actually cost us money, Don. You were supposed to pick up supplies on Kareva and you didn't. We had to pay a small fortune to have them expedited."

"I was working, Altrus. Stuff happens."

"With you, stuff is always happening. Nothing personal, Don, but enough's enough. I'm here at Jinkum's request, to serve you with a summons."

"You're *suing* me?"

"Breach of contract," Altrus said sadly.

"But what about my reputation? This will ruin my business!"

"Don. Don. What about the orphans?"

"Orphans?!" Don said, and the next thing he knew Altrus was dead.

3

No one was more surprised by this turn of events than Don. He didn't remember removing his pistol from its holster. He couldn't recall bracing the gun between his knee and the underside of the table as he aimed the weapon at Altrus. He certainly had no recollection of pressing the trigger. Everything had just sort of...happened.

His jaw dropped open and he stared at the mess he'd made.

The laser bolt had smashed Altrus's thorax and knocked him through the doorway. He'd been reduced to a steaming carcass on the floor. Blood and flecks of gore were sprayed on the walls and ceiling.

"Whoa," Don heard someone say.

The short, furry server appeared in the hallway. He looked at Altrus's dead body. Then he looked at Don.

"He shot first," Don said. He held the server's eye as he withdrew another large coin from his pocket and slapped it on the table. "You saw him try to kill me. Right, friend?"

"Sure, Captain," the server said, while adjusting his goggles. "That's exactly what I saw. The whole thing happened in a fraction of a parsec."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

1

Geev Stobbs was caught off guard by the President's second visit to his office.

When it happened he was at his desk, taking a little time out of his busy day to monitor the performance of his investment portfolio.

Upon entering public office the Secretary had placed his investments in a blind trust, as per the terms of government service. That was not the portfolio he was checking now. These investments were held in an anonymous account. Stobbs was not supposed to have such an account, but it wasn't strictly illegal.

The money for the anonymous portfolio came from the bonus Stobbs received when the Defense Star came in 1% under budget. For the sake of expedience the bonus had been authorized by the Secretary for himself.

The bonus amounted to almost five billion Q⁹; it was exactly as much money as had been saved from the Defense Star's budget. Stobbs found this to be poetically just.

(A certain project manager, a man named Zaw, had been instrumental in helping Stobbs achieve the savings and the bonus, and had been in line to collect a handsome payment of his own. Alas, he died shortly before the Defense Star was completed. And there was nothing suspicious about it at all.)

Stobbs was pleased to see that his investments were thriving. For a man with his political ambitions, massive wealth was a minimum requirement. Without it he would always be beholden to the galaxy's power brokers.

⁹ Shorthand for CU, or currency units.

Since it was their hegemony he sought to disrupt, enriching himself carried the weight of a moral imperative.

He was contemplating his next set of moves when the computer voice announced the President's arrival.

"What's this about?" Stobbs complained. He shut down his connection before rising from his desk and donning a respectful expression.

2

"Mister President."

"Mister Secretary."

"I won't ask you to sit, since you seem to prefer standing."

"I won't be offended by your failure to ask."

Stobbs sat down.

"This unscheduled visit must concern the Princess. You've liberated her secret and victory is at hand."

Brace said, "I've come to tell you to plot a course for Aventus."

With effort Stobbs ignored the slight of having his command of the Defense Star usurped. "Her home world?" he said. "Surely she wasn't foolish enough to put the base there."

"You're not stupid enough to believe that," Brace said. Which was a second slight for the Secretary to retain for future reference. When he took power, Pulsar would be the first to go. And it wouldn't be pretty.

"We're going there because it's time the Activists understood what they're up against," the President said.

"You want a demonstration of the Defense Star's capabilities."

Brace nodded.

"You've exhausted all other means of making her talk."

"She is an angry and obstinate young woman. Frankly she reminds me of myself at her age."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

1

Xen thought it prudent that he and Jakk leave the bar by a rear exit. Outside, Jakk used his PC (personal communicator) to contact Eighty-eight.

"We have to sell my skimmer, so just meet us at the hangar," Jakk instructed.

"We will do that," the android said.

"And don't be late. Everybody knows your model has a shitty time-management feature."

2

Eighty-eight terminated the transmission.

"Have I mentioned how much I loathe him?" he asked Lita.

Lita didn't respond. She was focused on the four peacekeepers headed their way.

"I said--"

Quiet, Lita said. She moved behind a pillar and beckoned Eighty-eight to join her.

"What?" he hissed.

I think they're looking for us.

"What will we do?" Eighty-eight fretted.

Wait.

Lita peeked out from behind the pillar. The four peacekeepers had gotten sidetracked. They were helping an elderly amphibian (the same kind of creature as the late Altrus) cross the street. The little green thing's little green legs took tiny steps.

Go ! Lita said, shoving Eighty-eight.

He stumbled out from behind the pillar and nearly fell. Lita ran into him and then they both nearly fell. They untangled themselves and hurried away.

3

Jakk and Xen took the skimmer to the first dealer they could find. He had come to Tanix from an even more desolate place. He hoped to be able to bring his family to the planet soon. He missed his pregnant wife and their children.

"Frakking immigrant," Jakk said, as he and Xen departed the dealership on foot. "He smiled too much. I bet he cheated us."

"And yet," said Xen, tucking 2,000 Q into the folds of his robe, "we got our price without any haggling. And for a skimmer that's seen better days."

"Eh. If we weren't in such a hurry there would've been some haggling, all right." Jakk touched his father's laser sword, which now hung from his belt. "I could have gotten us 20,000."

"I do like the way you think," Xen said.

4

From that point things happened quickly.

Xen and Jakk met up with Eighty-eight and Lita near Lot 49. The four of them proceeded to the hangar. They were observed by the same concerned stakeholder who'd reported the androids earlier.

She'd given up on the Red-Faced Child-Killers game after the home team fell behind by 400 points. On her way home she'd spotted Eighty-eight by chance and immediately called in another complaint. This time she intended to stick around until she was sure the authorities had done their job.

The complaint made its way to the peacekeepers whom the androids had eluded near FER. They rushed toward the spaceport, determined not to lose their quarry again.

Komba was just finishing up work on an exterior instrument panel when Xen and company entered the hangar.

Don was inside the ship, vomiting. He wished he hadn't eaten that bacon at the bar. He also wished he hadn't killed Altrus and covered it up.

Next time he'd get the soup.

Komba grunted a greeting at the newcomers. Xen raised a hand in reply.

The Aeon Terodakta was a big, boxy thing, gray where it should have been white and black where it should have been gray. It creaked like an old house.

"A ship with character," the old man said.

"That's one way to put it," Eighty-eight said.

"What a piece of shit!" Jakk said.

"There's another."

Function over form, Lita reminded them.

Komba grunted again, and then he drew his pistol.

"We pissed him off!" Jakk said. "Duck!"

"We?!" Eighty-eight said.

Komba fired over their heads and killed the peacekeeper who had just entered the hangar. A second peacekeeper took cover and then began returning fire. He was soon joined by a third, and then a fourth.

"Heavens!" Eighty-eight cried.

"Into the ship!" Xen ordered.

They ran. Laser bolts zinged all around them, crinkling the air and filling the hangar with an ozone-like smell.

Komba was outgunned and the ship's ramp seemed far away. "We'll never make it!" Eighty-eight said.

And then down the ramp came Don Slovack, with two pistols blazing. "YAAAH!" he shouted, blasting away. There was still a little throw-up on his chin.

"Get aboard!" he yelled at the passengers. They scooted past him and up the ramp. First Xen, then Jakk, then Lita and finally Eighty-eight, who couldn't take his optical sensors off of the Terodakta's captain. His head swiveled 180 degrees so that he could keep looking while his body carried him forward.

The shooting intensified. A second peacekeeper fell. The remaining two fought on, but the torrent of laser fire from Don and Komba drove them back and out of the hangar.

Don signaled to Komba, who backed his way up the ramp. Once inside the ship Komba pressed a button and the ramp began to rise.

Don backed his way up it, still firing. Near the top of the ramp he bumped into Eighty-eight, who was watching him raptly.

"My hero," the android said. "And such a handsome one!"

"Move your ass or I'll tear you to pieces!" Don said.

"Offer accepted!" Eighty-eight replied. But he did move.

The ramp closed. Moments later the ship's engines coughed and hacked to life. The Terodakta rose unsteadily, sputtering and yawing. As the surviving peacekeepers rushed back into the room, firing away, the ship scraped against one wall, bounced off of another, and then righted itself and cleared the hangar. Its engines pulsed, a piece of one of the rear blast shields fell off, and then the Terodakta zoomed up into the sky.

The concerned stakeholder was watching the ship's escape with dismay when that piece of blast shield landed on her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

1

To the extent that Don and Komba had put any money into the Terodakta, most of it must have been spent on the cockpit. Everything in there looked close to new. The electronics glowed serenely. A low, industrious hum filled the space: the sound of every instrument, gauge and control panel performing optimally. The seats were made of rich Neimoidian leather, and they could easily accommodate someone as large as Komba or as slight as Jakk.

Be that as it may there were only four seats, which left Eighty-eight and Lita to stand in the back while Komba and Don operated the controls and Xen and Jakk looked on.

Lita didn't mind. She was interfacing with the ship's operating system. Eighty-eight didn't object either. He had a clear view of the back of Don's head, which was as perfect as the rest of him.

The ship was well beyond Tanix's troposphere now and climbing fast. The visible sky was a deep purple-black color.

"A question, if I may," Xen said.

"Shoot," said Don. He was in his element, sitting there at the controls. He was the master of this domain. His ship was performing beautifully; there were paying passengers aboard; his good friend Komba was by his side; and the mystery and romance of deep space beckoned. Tanix, ugly place that it was, was receding. So were Don's memories of what happened in the bar. "Ask me anything. Part of the captain's job is having all the answers."

"It's really a question for Komba," Xen said.

Then the barrage began.

Laser cannon fire bracketed the ship. Enormous bolts of energy exploded all around. The Terodakta shuddered. Her red-alert lights came on, painting the cockpit an eerie shade.

"What the hell?" Don said.

Komba grunted angrily.

"Where's it coming from?" Xen asked.

"Don't you have scanners on this flying frakking trash pile?" Jakk said.

The tense look on Don's face broke open long enough to let a smile flash over his lips. Then he was back to business.

"Nothing on the scanners. Must be those new long range cannons they've been installing on space defenders. Hold on!"

"So courageous under pressure," Eighty-eight said.

The ship began evasive maneuvers.

"Shields okay, Komba?"

Grunt.

"What about the one we lost on takeoff?"

Louder grunt.

The intensity of the barrage increased. The androids banged and rattled against each other. The seated passengers fought to remain upright.

Loud worried grunt.

"What is it?" Jakk said.

"Now they're on the scanners. Two space defenders, closing fast."

"This is dreadful," Eighty-eight said.

"We only need a few seconds more and then we'll enter hyperwarp."

"In a few seconds we'll be *dead*," Jakk said.

"Dead?" Don said, as the ship's engines seemed to falter.

"We're doomed!" Eighty-eight cried.

But no: the apparent loss of power was actually the opposite. The engines had only been revving up to deliver the Terodakta into hyperwarp. With an enormous burst the ship vaulted to the speed of light. Everything became a blur, and the sounds and commotion of the barrage ceased, just like that.

Don turned and winked at Jakk. "...or dead gone?"

Jakk scowled. Nothing could have pleased Don more.

"Whoo-hoo!" Eighty-eight exclaimed. "You saved us, Captain!"

Show some dignity, Lita said.

3

It would be smooth passage the rest of the way to Aventus. The IP couldn't track the Terodakta at light speed.

It was known that the Division of Defense was working on tracking technology, but by the most generous estimates such an innovation was at least 30 solar cycles away.

4

"Back to my question," Xen said, after things had calmed down.

"Right," Don said. "Sure. Fire away."

"I'm curious, Komba," Xen went on. "Why did you shoot at the peacekeepers in the hangar? They were after us, not you."

Komba grunted indifferently.

"I bet one of them shot first," Don said, mostly to himself. "Which makes it self- defense. Totally understandable."

"Now, Komba," Xen said with mild impatience.

"I could translate," Eighty-eight offered.

"I don't need a frakkin translator," Komba said.

"You can talk?!" Jakk said.

"How interesting," Eighty-eight said.

"Here we go," Don said.

Saw it coming, Lita said.

"Of course I can motherfrakkin talk, farm boy," said the bearlike creature. "How do you think Xen and me worked out this deal? Frakkin sign language?"

"But if you could talk the whole time..." Jakk began.

"Why didn't I?"

"Well yeah."

"No need to, that's all. You understood fine without me sayin a word, so why would I waste my breath?"

"I guess that makes sense."

"I'm really frakkin glad you think so. That's what I wanted, you know. To be sure my decision would meet the approval of a sand-for-brains kid and his creepy old friend and their two gay androids."

There was a pause.

"And now to answer your question, old man, not that it's any of your frakkin business: The reason I shot that peacekeeper is that the motherfrakker pointed a gun at my customers. What the frakk was I SUPPOSED to do?"

"Of course," Xen said.

"Basically, Komba hates everybody," Don explained.

"Including you, Don."

"Me most of all, right?"

"I don't know why the frakk you're proud of that."

"See what I mean?" Don said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

1

Planet Aventus. "The jewel of the galaxy," it was still called by some. From the vantage point of the approaching Defense Star it shone like a giant green-blue marble.

Long ago Aventus had been the seat of government. All other worlds revolved around it, as the saying went. With the rise of the Incorporated Planets and the transfer of the galactic capital to a new world, Aventus's stature was diminished. It became, in the eyes of others, just another planet.

Not so in the hearts and minds of its population. Aventians still considered themselves the best the galaxy had to offer. Better educated, more open-minded, better informed, more compassionate, humbler....

The planet had been utilizing only clean, renewable sources of energy for several decades. All plastics and other hydrocarbon-derived materials were banned. Aventians recycled at higher rate than any other population. They spent less time on the network than anyone else.

They had the most progressive tax structure and the fewest tax exemptions. The Aventian program of social services was the most comprehensive one to be found anywhere. Businesses were strictly regulated. Corruption, governmental and otherwise, was so low as to be non-existent.

Discrimination and prejudice were things of the distant past. There was little crime. There hadn't been a murder in many solar cycles. No one wanted or needed to own laser weapons; even the police didn't use them. The whole population was vegan.

So naturally Aventus was a breeding ground for terrorists. Activism was the biggest faction but it was just one cause out of dozens. The thing these movements had in common was an abject hatred of the IP and everything it represented.

Thus when the Defense Star appeared on the planet's scanners, all hell broke loose on the surface. Preparations were made for war.

2

From the bridge of the platform Brace Pulsar and Secretary Stobbs monitored Aventus's weapons systems. The Aventian government had closed all official channels of communication and its military was on high alert.

"It's going just the way you hoped," the Secretary told Brace. "And we haven't even breached their defense perimeter yet."

"We won't need to."

"Such confidence. I hope nothing goes wrong."

"It would be unfortunate," the President said, "if your platform failed to meet my expectations."

Moments later Kia was brought in, manacled. She'd managed to kill no one on the trip here from her room, although one of the guards had the beginnings of a decent shiner.

"Ah, Princess," Stobbs said, oozing insincerity. "Let me be the first to officially welcome you aboard."

Kia gave him her prettiest smile. "Go frakk yourself, Stobbs."

"As your planet's last hope, you may want to moderate your tone."

Kia gasped at the sight of her home world on the main display.

"The Secretary is correct," Brace said, "even if he has overstepped his authority."

Stobbs frowned.

"This is your last chance to tell me where to find the base."

"You can't attack us," Kia said. "We've done nothing to provoke you!"

"We have no attack capabilities. However, if fired upon we will defend ourselves. And, as your people have been informed, once your planet has been disarmed we will immediately begin implementing market-based initiatives."

"You...you MONSTER. How *dare* you impose your freedoms on us!"

"The choice is yours," Brace said.

Kia bit her lip.

"Not for much longer."

Her body slumped in defeat.

"Dyyoks," she blurted. "That's where the base is. Now leave my planet alone."

An alarm sounded and the platform went on red-alert. "They've launched a missile," a crew member reported. "Headed straight for us."

"No!" Kia cried.

"Sensors indicate it's an atomic," the crew member added, his voice quavering.

"An atomic?" Kia said. Her mood changed entirely. "Hah! Never mind! Our atomics are the BEST. We're all gonna die!" she cried ecstatically.

"I think not," Brace said. "Activate the shield!"

On the main display appeared high-resolution video of the missile's progress toward the Defense Star. The video was being shot by IP drones which had been positioned for just such an eventuality.

As the shield was activated a pale yellow sphere materialized around the Defense Star.

"Twenty seconds," the crew member said.

"This will be an excellent test, Mister Secretary," Brace said.

"Indeed."

The missile flew into the shield and simply disintegrated. One second it was there, the next it was utterly gone. There was no disturbance of the shield. It was as if the attack had never happened.

Aboard the Defense Star all remained calm. The lights didn't flicker, the walls didn't tremble.

"Success," the Secretary said.

"Oh, this is bad," Kia moaned.

"Sirs," the crew member said with urgency. "We're showing ten -- no, twenty -- new launches. All atomics."

"This is really bad," Kia said.

"Twenty or two hundred, it doesn't matter," the Secretary said.

"That's not the point!"

Everyone on the bridge watched, rapt, as phalanxes of missiles hit the shield and disappeared.

"Oh, you frakking morons," Kia said, utterly distraught. "What've you done?"

"We've paved the way to peace and prosperity," Brace said. "For Aventus and the entire galaxy."

"No. No. What you've done is rob my people of their most precious resource: Their sense of superiority. Without it they'll have nothing. No will to go on."

"Just a bit melodramatic," Stobbs said.

"Watch," Kia said.

3

They turned back to the main display.

For what seemed a long time nothing happened. The planet sat there quietly.

Then the crew member who'd spoken earlier gasped. Before he could reveal why he'd gasped the reason became clear.

The planet shuddered. There was a small flash on the surface, quickly followed by another. Then five more.

"What is this?" Brace asked.

Dozens of flashes, making the planet sparkle.

"Surely they aren't..." Stobbs began.

Hundreds of explosions. Then thousands. The flashes continued, filling the screen with so much light that it was difficult to make out Aventus at all.

Then there was one gigantic explosion, more than the sum of the many that had come before. When it was over all that remained of the planet was a cloud of dust.

The crew of the Defense Star bore silent witness to the destruction. Stobbs looked at the President, but Brace ignored him.

"I told you," Kia said. Her tone was triumphant but her tear-streaked face showed anguish. "Didn't I tell you? Frakk with us and we will frakk" -- she faltered -- "ourselves...UP!"

She did as much of a double fist-pump as her manacles would allow. Then she burst into fresh tears. Then her sobs turned into gleeful cackling.

"Get her out of here," Brace ordered. His voice was firm but he felt shaken. He didn't relax until the Princess was carted off the bridge.

"And now to Dyyoks?" Stobbs asked. "To end the conflict once and for all?"

"Don't disturb me until we get there," Brace said, and with that he left the bridge.

On the way to his suite he couldn't get his mind off of Kia. Her final outburst had deeply unsettled him. The mood swings, the crazed look on her face, the way she kicked and screamed as the guards carried her away:

It was all eerily reminiscent of the woman he'd once loved.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

1

With the Terodakta on autopilot her crew and passengers moved to the ship's lounge. There were few amenities to be found there -- it wasn't often that Don and Komba had guests -- but it was much less cramped than the cockpit.

At the far end of the lounge, in the big open space where Komba sometimes toyed with his food, Jakk stood in an aggressive posture. He'd ignited his laser sword and was swinging it in wide, reckless arcs as he practiced his fighting sounds. "Huah!" he said. "Cheeah!"

Satisfied, he stopped swinging and addressed his opponent. "Ready?"

A few feet away stood, or cringed really, 88-XOR, whose weapon for the imminent battle was the severed arm of some long-forgotten and unfortunate android.

"Hardly," Eighty-eight said.

"Remember, Jakk," Xen said, "your sword isn't to touch anything. Especially not anything belonging to our hosts."

Jakk's eyes flitted nervously in the direction of Komba, whose bulk was not at all diminished by the size of this room.

"It's movement that I want you to--" Xen began, and then he grew pale. He grabbed his forehead with one hand and used the other to steady himself. His legs buckled and he sat down heavily.

"A great disruption of the Power," he muttered. "Something awful has happened. I sense destruction...loss of life on a massive scale...."

"You can sense all that?" Jakk asked.

"I feel it in my very bones. "

"Wow. So should I start?"

Xen hunched over and moaned.

"Actually," Eighty-eight said, "I'm feeling it too. In my very...carbon fiber exoskeleton. Terrible things! I simply can't go through with this!" He dropped the severed arm and scooted away, careful not to turn his back on Jakk.

"Aw, c'mon," Jakk said. Carelessly he let his sword arm drop, and then he jumped back when the laser scorched the floor.

2

Eighty-eight joined Don, Komba and Lita at the other end of the room. The latter two were seated across from each other at a game table. Don watched from nearby, on a seat with just enough extra room for one besotted android.

Eighty-eight tapped Don's shoulder. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all," Don said. Eighty-eight sat down and Don got up and found a place to stand.

Eighty-eight sighed. He turned his attention to the game.

The table between Komba and Lita was a holographic projector. The game consisted of a bright green playing field upon which 22 humanoid pieces moved about in complex patterns. Half of the pieces were black and the other half were white.

"What is this?" the android asked.

The players were too focused to answer, so Don said, "It's called fuutbal."

Komba grunted with satisfaction as one of his pieces grabbed one of Lita's pieces and wrenched its head off. Bright-red holographic blood spurted over everything.

"Is it always this violent?"

"No, it used to be a lot worse."

Lita looked on approvingly as one of her pieces stomped the very entrails out of one of Komba's.

"Is there strategy involved?"

"Of course. See how two of Komba's players are pulling apart one of your friend's? That's a strategy. What's that called when you do that, Komba?"

"Dammit, Don," Komba said, without taking his eyes off the game, which had grown very intense. "Do I look like I'm ready to take frakkin questions?"

The lapse in his concentration allowed Lita to score the winning points.

"Mother FRAKK!" Komba said, slamming his paws on the table.

Lita's pieces celebrated under the pulsing lights and booming sounds of a virtual fireworks display. Komba's pieces trudged off the "field."

"Now I owe this frakkin android money," Komba informed Don. "You happy?"

"If it makes you feel any better, think about all the money I owe you."

"I do think about it, Don. Every motherfrakkin day I show up to work on this ship so I can keep my frakkin eye on you."

"I had a gambling problem for a while," Don explained to the androids. "But before it became a problem, I won the Terodakta in a card game!"

"Sheeeit. Guy owed you a million Q and you accepted this frakkin ship as payment."

"Komba thinks I got screwed," Don said.

Meanwhile, Xen had recovered and he was running Jakk through basic exercises with the laser sword.

A small drone was circling Jakk and shooting very mild stun bolts at him. His job was to deflect them with the sword. The aspiring Star Knight was operating at about a 40% success rate.

"Ow! Dammit!"

Maybe closer to 30%.

"Remember," Xen counseled, "you wield the Power, but the Power also wields you."

"Like I'm on autopilot?"

"If that helps you to understand, yes."

"So it could do my chores for me? If I still had chores?"

"Concentrate."

The drone darted left and fired. Jakk got his sword up late.

"SHIT that hurt!"

Xen put the drone on standby. He began rummaging through the lounge's supply cabinets.

While Jakk waited, Don wandered over.

"You'd be better off with a pistol, kid."

"Is that your way of saying you don't believe in the Power?"

"Maybe when I was your age. Now I'm more of a supply-and-demand kind of guy."

"Try this, Jakk," Xen said. "If I'm not mistaken it's a sensory deprivation helmet."

"So that's where that went," Don said. "I thought maybe Jhutha took it with her."

"Along with your frakkin heart, huh Don?" Komba called over.

Xen and Jakk looked at Don and he became self-conscious. "I think I'm needed in the cockpit," he said, before heading off.

"Go ahead," Xen told Jakk, holding out the helmet, "put it on."

"You want me to fight blind?!"

"I want you to follow your instincts. Let the Power flow through you."

With great reluctance Jakk donned the helmet and assumed a fighting stance. Xen activated the drone.

Zing!

"Ow!" came the muffled cry from under the helmet.

"Visualize the drone. The Power will point you to it."

Zing!

"Mother--!"

Zing! Zing! Zing!

"AAARRRRRGHHH!" Jakk flung off the helmet and it clanked across the room. His face was twisted, his eyes full of hatred. "COME HERE YOU LITTLE SHIT!" he cried.

He swung wildly with the sword, again and again, cornering the drone. It zinged him one more time but he didn't even notice.

When the drone tried to dart out of the corner Jakk hit it with a glancing blow. Its repulsors cut out and it fell to the floor. With a triumphant "Hah!" Jakk sliced the drone in half.

"Hah!" he cried again, stomping on the pieces. "Hah! Hah! Hah! FRAKK YOU TO FRAKKING DEATH!"

Sweating, breathing hard, he put away his sword and looked at Xen, who was regarding him with a sympathetic, if wary, expression.

The old man shrugged. "It's your first day."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

1

The incoming call was from Stobbs...just as Brace had expected. He touched a button and an image of the Secretary's face appeared before him. In the moody blue glow of the hologram Stobbs looked like something that had died and been reanimated.

"Mister President--"

"Let me guess," Brace said. "The Princess lied to us. The base isn't on Dyyoks."

"You don't seem at all surprised."

"I've encountered the likes of her before," Brace said carefully. Thinking, again, of his long-dead lady love, another passionate crusader for a wrong-headed cause.

He was brought back to the conversation by the sound of Stobbs clearing his throat. "Did you say something?"

"I asked you what you want to do with her now. She's of no further use to us, wouldn't you agree?"

"We aren't going to kill her, Stobbs."

"A known terrorist...it would be completely warranted...."

"Haven't you witnessed enough death today?"

"With her gone we wouldn't need to find the base. Activism would crumble. Think of the lives it would save."

"She's a stakeholder and a former Board member. The example we need to make is of granting her due process under the EULA."

"With all respect," the Secretary said, "on this subject I believe your judgment is...clouded."

"What are you insinuating?" Brace asked testily.

"Nothing at all. Whatever could there be to insinuate?"

Brace resisted the urge to draw his sword and stab the hologram through its virtual mouth. The Secretary sensed his anger and was pleased. Also a little concerned, in light of that choking business from earlier.

"Enough," Brace said. "We won't lower ourselves to her level."

"As you wish."

"However, due to the nature of her crimes and her refusal to cooperate, she will be taken to Abilifi until proceedings begin."

For possibly the first time in their long association Brace witnessed an honest reaction from Stobbs. The Secretary was delighted and he couldn't hide it. "An inspired choice, Mister President. I'll arrange her transportation immediately."

2

"Abilifi?" Kia repeated after the news had been delivered to her. "Frakking ABILIFI?!"

She was alone in the celebrity suite. Her manacles had been removed. "Not that!" she cried. "Anything but that!"

The horror of it sank in and she sat down clumsily on the floor. Then she looked up at one of the surveillance cameras in the room and vowed, "You'll pay for this, Pulsar! Hear me? If it's the LAST FRAKKING THING I EVER DO!"

3

Abilifi was an artificial planet owned and operated by the company of the same name. It was the galaxy's number one resort destination. On Abilifi you could buy anything you wanted at whatever price and on whatever terms.

If you were not a creature of means, not to worry, for you could also borrow as much money as someone would lend you. Abilifi was the place for 100% pure commerce, unregulated by any governing body, untaxed by any entity, subject to no laws, restrictions, ethical guidelines, moral principles or questions of propriety. It was the ultimate free market, and being sent there was Kia's idea of torture.

True torture, not the sexy kind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

1

The crew and passengers of the Aeon Terodakta were once again crowded into the cockpit.

"Exiting hyperwarp in three...two...one," Don said. He touched a control and the ship's engines powered down. The blurry space visible from the cockpit resolved itself into a gorgeously sharp vista of bright stars against the black void.

Don turned to Jakk, looking very pleased with himself. Actually even more than usual. "Told you we'd get here fast, didn't--"

"Where the frakk is it?" Komba said.

"Where is what?"

"The motherfrakkin PLANET, Don. The thing we should be seeing right the frakk in front of us."

"Check the scanner."

"Great frakkin idea, Captain, would've never frakkin thought of that myself. IT'S NOT ON THE FRAKKIN SCANNER EITHER."

"I liked him better when he wasn't talking," Eighty-eight said quietly to Lita.

"What the hell happened?" Don said. "We can't be that far off course. Can we?"

"Since I set the frakkin course," Komba said, "the answer is no."

"The planet must have been destroyed by the IP," Xen said. "It explains what I felt earlier."

"Holy shit," Don said. "What kind of weapon could do that?"

"Something totally killer," Jakk said.

Xen glanced at him.

"And evil too. Frakk those assholes!"

"So what do we do now?" Don asked.

"No disrespect to all the dead motherfrakkers," Komba said, "but we're still gettin paid, right?"

A proximity alarm sounded.

"What is it?" Jakk said.

"Another ship, coming up fast behind us."

A single-seat craft flew into their field of vision from overhead and sped past the Terodakta.

"That's an IP fighter," Xen said. "Liberator class if I'm not mistaken."

"They couldn't have followed us from Tanix," Don said.

"They didn't. It's a short range ship."

"How does a hermit from Tanix know all this stuff?" Jakk wondered.

"One tries to keep up with the times," Xen said.

"There aren't any bases around here," Don said, "so where did that thing come from and where's it going?"

"Shouldn't we be worried about that motherfrakker havin seen us?"

"Good point, pal," Don said. "Flood all their frequencies with static. Keep that ship incommunicado until we can shoot it down."

"Rhetorical frakkin question, Don. I was already jammin his ass."

"Oh. Right. Good."

2

The Terodakta was fast, but the fighter had a big head start. It took time for Don and Komba to get within firing range. Too much time, as it turned out.

"Few more seconds," Don said.

Ahead of the fighter, still distant but getting closer and bigger every second, was a large structure.

"What's it headed for?" Jakk asked.

"Some kind of floating city," Don said distractedly.

"That's no floating city," Xen said with dawning alarm. "It's a space station."

That's no space station, Lita said. It's a bleeding-edge consumer platform with enough high-end functionality to penetrate any market.

Everyone turned their attention to the little brown android.

They call it the Defense Star.

"How in the world--" Eighty-eight began.

Found it on darknet.

"Whatever the frakk it is," Komba said, "it's pretty damn big."

"I have a very bad feeling about this," Jakk said.

"Nice line, kid," Don said. "I'm gonna use that someday. Meantime, full reverse, Komba! We gotta get out of here."

"One step ahead of you, Don, like always."

The ship began to shudder. It stopped moving under its own power.

"Shit," Komba said. "Tractor beam."

"What do we do now?" Jakk said.

"Not much we can do, farm boy. Cept figure out how to hide our asses for when we get boarded."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

1

The small, ungainly ship being tractored into the Defense Star had no identifying markings and couldn't be found in any DoD registries. These facts were enough to raise suspicions among the crew operating the beam. They reported their findings to the appropriate superior, who in turn did the same, until news of the mystery ship reached the Secretary.

Stobbs' response came in the form of orders passed back down the chain of command to the tractor beam crew: They were to make a 3D scan of the vessel and transmit it to the Division of Space Vehicles, whose database was the most comprehensive in all the galaxy. As soon as they heard back from the DSV they were to contact the Secretary directly.

The crew leader didn't look forward to speaking with the Secretary. That man gave him the creeps. There were rumors circulating on the network that Stobbs was actually 384 solar cycles old, and that he kept himself alive by eating babies.

2

By the time the crew leader reported in, the President had joined Stobbs on the bridge.

"Still waiting on DSV, sir. You know how they are. However we were able to confirm that this ship matches the description of the one that escaped Tanix."

"The stolen data," Brace said.

"Any life forms or androids on the ship?" Stobbs asked the crew leader.

"We don't know, sir."

"You don't know?"

"We don't have remote scanning capability yet. The software hasn't been installed. We can do a manual scan but we'd have to borrow the equipment from another--"

"Get it done," Stobbs said. "No more excuses, no more delays. Report your findings immediately." And with that he ended the call.

He knew what was coming next and he composed himself before facing the President.

"No remote scanning capability?" Brace asked. "No manual scanner on hand?"

"Completion of the Defense Star on schedule was a mammoth undertaking, Mister President. Minor oversights are regrettable but unavoidable."

For several moments the President said nothing, and Stobbs' mind turned on itself, taunting him with the possibility that Pulsar knew the truth. That he, Stobbs, had not been as clever as he'd believed.

The President was aware of the misappropriated project funds. He understood that "minor oversights" were "unavoidable" because certain software vendors and equipment suppliers and other budgeted contributors to the project had never been hired. That the monies which had been provisioned for them were now sitting in the Secretary's anonymous portfolio...

"I sense something," the President said.

Stobbs didn't trust himself to speak. He lifted an eyebrow inquisitively.

"A disturbance in the Power. A presence I haven't felt since--"

Abruptly the President whirled and left the bridge. Stobbs watched him, confused but relieved.

So it was nothing after all, the Secretary mused. Pulsar was preoccupied with his mystic silliness. Good. Let him worry about "the Power" while true power, the means to rule the galaxy, was steadily consolidated in this vessel and the man in charge of it.

Stobbs' time was coming. He could feel it. His career would soon explode with the brilliance of a supernova.

CHAPTER THIRTY

1

The mystery ship had been tractored into Hangar Bay 7734, which was colloquially known as Shit Bay. This docking area, by design, wasn't near anything of importance. All volatile and/or hazardous materials were delivered here. In the event that a shipment of weapons blew up or a dangerous substance leaked or was spilled, the damage could be contained in 7734 before it affected critical operations or personnel. If that made the hangar crew feel somewhat expendable, well, they could always quit. There were plenty of potential replacements who valued gainful employment over workplace safety.

Bay 7734 was also where all of the Defense Star's garbage and human waste were sent to be loaded onto vessels headed for planet Humeera, whose deep canyons and even deeper oceans made ideal depositories. (Tourism had once been the planet's primary source of revenue, but waste management had proven to be far more lucrative.)

All of this made working in Hangar Bay 7734 a shit detail; hence the nickname. It also meant that those assigned to 7734 were the least motivated employees on the Defense Star.

Which might help explain why the crew members who searched the mystery ship didn't find the three humans, two androids and one large surly creature hiding in the cargo hold.

2

"Told you we'd be safe here," Don whispered. He and the others were squashed into a storage compartment beneath the deck of the hold. Or rather, the humans and the androids were squashed into the little bit of space not taken up by Komba.

"Are they gone yet?" Jakk whispered. "I can barely breathe."

Everyone listened for footfalls. Seconds ago they'd been able to hear several sets of them diminishing into the auditory distance. Now there was nothing.

"Either they're gone or it's a trap," Xen said softly.

"I vote for frakkin gone," Komba said. "Cause I'm tired of sittin here in everybody's frakkin sweat and stink."

He stood up, which jostled everyone. None of them was dumb enough to complain. Then Komba pushed the deck panel out of the way, admitting lots of light and causing the humans to scrunch their eyes.

"Have a look around, my man," Komba told Eighty-eight.

"Excuse m--"

Before the android could finish he was hauled up out of the compartment and deposited on the deck, his metal parts clattering on the composite surface.

"Any motherfrakkers pointin guns at you?" Komba asked.

3

The answer was no. They climbed up out of the compartment.

"So now what?" Don said. "We can't go anywhere until we disable the tractor beam."

"If we can get to a data port," Xen said, "I'm sure Lita can do it remotely."

Oooh, Lita said at the thought of interfacing with the Defense Star's operating system.

"Control yourself," Eighty-eight chided.

"Well that's a start," Don said. "But how do we get to a port?"

"Here's an even better frakkin question," Komba said. He was looking at a monitor that was streaming footage from a security cam. The view from the cam was of the area near the boarding ramp. Two peacekeepers were approaching the ramp.

Komba turned to address Don and Jakk. "What size uniforms you motherfrakkers wear?"

4

The two peacekeepers were carrying a large and cumbersome device that appeared to combine elements of a laser cannon, a cellular transmitter and a medium-sized power generator. This was a manual scanner: one of the oldest and cheapest ones still in use. Its range was so limited that the peacekeepers had no choice but to lug it all the way inside the mystery ship. One man stood on either side of the scanner and with a stuttering, shuffling rhythm they carried the device like a battering ram.

"Hold up," the peacekeeper on the left said, as they reached the top of the boarding ramp. "My hand keeps slipping. I need a better grip."

"No good grips on this piece of shit," the other peacekeeper said. They set the scanner down and took a breather.

"So who did we piss off this time? How did this job end up in our laps?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

"We have been way too lucky lately. Be nice to have a little less luck for a change."

With a chorus of grunts they picked up the scanner and headed into the ship, where a lot less luck awaited them.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

1

From his office overlooking Hangar Bay 7734 the crew leader had a clear view of the mystery ship. It was a grimy, blocky vessel, something that seemed to have been assembled haphazardly from mismatched components, like the toy of an idiot child. The crew leader had a passion for great design, and this ship was an example of the exact opposite. It offended him. He found himself hoping the scan of the ship would turn up nothing just so they could be rid of the stupid, ugly thing. It had probably been built on Lantis at some ridiculously low cost.

"What's taking those two so long?" the crew leader wondered aloud.

"Yes, sir," said the technician sitting at the office's comm station. She was the only other person in here, and her response to the crew leader's question suggested she was fooling around on the network instead of doing her job.

He could have said something -- and certainly should have -- but he'd reached the point of not wanting to fight these small battles. The technician showed up every day, and usually on time; in 7734 that made her a model employee.

"Maybe they fell into an interdimensional sex portal," the crew leader said.

"Yes, sir."

The crew leader's career had once been very different. He'd owned his own company, which made the earpieces for peacekeeper helmets.

They were good, well designed, solidly made earpieces, and while they might not have been cheap, they weren't priced exorbitantly. It was a successful, respectable business.

Enter the Lantese. They used child labor and subpar components, and their products cost a fraction of the ones the crew leader's company made. He couldn't compete on those terms, and soon he was out of business. With few viable options for earning a living, he'd taken this position on the Defense Star.

Once the IP had been his partner, and now it was his employer.

It was *almost* the same thing.

2

He was still watching the mystery ship and wondering why the scan was taking so long when his patience was finally rewarded. One of the peacekeepers who'd been assigned to do the scan came walking down the boarding ramp.

The crew leader spoke into his PC: "KV916, have you finished the scan?"

The peacekeeper looked all around the bay, seeming bewildered. Or maybe just cautious.

"KV916, what's going on down there? Please report."

The peacekeeper spotted the crew leader. He tapped the side of his helmet and then he shook his head.

Bad reception, the crew leader realized.

Well of course. The shitty Lantese earpiece wasn't working properly.

He motioned for the peacekeeper to come up to the office. The peacekeeper made an "okay" gesture. Then the crew leader turned away from the window.

"You know," he told the technician, "someday all these cost-cutting measures are going to come back to bite us in the ass. You watch."

"It won't be just a bad earpiece," he went on. "It'll be something a lot bigger and more important that malfunctions, and it'll get a lot of people killed. And what's the IP going to do if the Lantese decide to raise the prices on all the products they make for us? It's not like we'll be able to buy from someone else. There aren't any other suppliers out there. So what'll happen then?"

"Yes, sir," the technician said.

The crew leader didn't care that the tech wasn't listening. He had more to say on this subject, lots more, dammit, and he was about to start saying it when the office door opened and in came two peacekeepers with rifles raised. The crew leader had a brief moment to wonder why those two were pointing their guns at him, and then his thoughts were lost in a hail of laser fire.

Unfortunately for him, the peacekeepers' Lantese-made rifles worked quite well.

3

The shooting stopped. The echoes of the lasers faded away. The crew leader and the technician lay dead on the office floor. Don and Jakk removed their helmets.

"Typically, kid," Don advised, "with a weapon like this, one shot is enough."

"Fah. Where's the fun in that?" To underline his point Jakk took aim at the crew leader's corpse and shot off the man's foot. (He'd been aiming for the head.) "Once they stop moving it's a lot easier."

"You know what? You're right," Don said. "I must be getting old or something." He raised his rifle and sighted what was left of the technician's head.

"You are old, Don," Komba said from behind them, "so quit frakkin around."

Don started and almost discharged the gun anyway. He and Jakk turned to see Komba entering the room, followed by the others.

"But not as old as this motherfrakker," Komba said, indicating Xen, "or me for that matter. So let's do what we gotta do to get the frakk outta here."

"How old are you?" Jakk asked.

"You know who your dad's dad's dad's dad was, farmie?"

"I barely even know who my dad was."

"Well I'm probably older than all of those motherfrakkers combined. Where you think all this hair on me comes from? It's been growin for 300-and-some frakkin solar cycles."

"Speaking of time," Xen said.

"Right. Sorry I got distracted there, old fella. So Brownie's gonna disable the tractor beam..."

"Looks like she's already at it," Jakk said.

"She's at something," Eighty-eight said. "Lord knows what."

Lita had plugged in to a data port and was clearly enjoying herself.

"How long do you, uh, need to..." Don asked her delicately. He smiled weakly at the others. "Feel like I'm interrupting a private moment."

I can't disable the beam remotely, Lita said, unperturbed. Their encryption is too strong.

"What about manually?" Xen asked.

On the room's main display appeared a schematic of the Defense Star. Lita manipulated the image until only a small section of the platform was visible. Here could be seen two brightly colored flashing dots.

Our location is green and the location of the control panel for the beam is red.

"It's not far," Xen said. "I'll go."

"I'll go with you," Jakk offered. "Frakk some shit up along the way."

"You're needed here."

"No he isn't," Komba said.

"This is a mission that requires subtlety," Xen said, glancing at the remains of the dead crew members.

"Your point," Komba conceded.

"Besides, Jakk," Xen said to the disappointed young man, "I need you to make sure that the stolen data are delivered to the Activists. Otherwise the galaxy will never be rid of the tyranny of freedom."

"Sounds pretty boring, but whatever."

Xen put his hands on Jakk's shoulders and spoke to him intently. "Our paths may diverge, but our fates will always be intertwined. And the Power is with you. It always has been and it always will be."

"Cool," Jakk said.

4

The old man went on his way. He disappeared around a corner.

"Dude is weird," Komba said. "He talks funny."

"Did I read something about him being a p--" Don asked.

"Xen is a great man," Jakk said with indignation.

"You just met the motherfrakker yesterday," Komba pointed out.

"Yeah well sometimes you just know things, you know, in the heart of your mind. Your mind's heart. You just do!"

"Farm boy's got a case of the feels," Komba said.

Meanwhile, Lita was still plugged into the data port and having way too much fun.

"Could you just...not?" Eighty-eight said.

Wait, Lita said, her tone growing serious.

"I think we've all waited long enough."

She's here!

"Kia?" Jakk said.

"Trust fund lady?" Don asked.

"Rich bitch?" Komba said.

She's in the celebrity suite.

"At least they're treating her well," Eighty-eight said.

"We gotta rescue her, kid. I need to get paid."

"You ain't the only one, Don," Komba said.

She's scheduled to be transported to Abilifi in less than one hour. We can't let that happen.

Everyone looked at Jakk expectantly.

"Then I guess we'd better get moving," he said.

Princess Kia. In the flesh.

His skin tingled. His guts roiled.

5

"So what's the plan, kid?" Don said.

Happy for the distraction, Jakk said, "Lita, find us the safest route to the celebrity suite."

Done.

Now he looked around the room, his mind racing. One of his hands brushed his utility belt and he looked at what he'd touched: a pair of restraints.

Inspired, he unclipped them from the belt. "Okay, now, Komba, you'll be in these."

"Motherfrakker says WHAT?"

At that moment Jakk was thankful for the pee tube built into the armor he had on. "J-just for a little while," he said. "F-for the plan."

"This plan's a buncha bullshit," Komba said. But he grabbed the restraints from Jakk and handed them to Don. "Do me up, Don. I'm not sure I trust farmie over there."

"Sure, pal," Don said.

"And if you make these motherfrakkers too tight, Don, I'll put them on your balls after this frakkin plan has been carried out."

"I know you will, pal."

6

Moments later they were ready to go.

"What should we do while you're gone?" Eighty-eight said.

"Well," Jakk said, "Lita will monitor our progress, make sure the route stays clear, unlock doors we can't get through, and alert us immediately if the Princess gets moved out of the suite. I don't know what the frakk you'll be up to. Thinking about Don, maybe?"

"Ha ha, yes. That's very clever...my lord. What I wanted to know was what do we do if someone shows up here while you're away?"

"You're the big thinker, Mister Android. Figure something out."

With that Jakk put his helmet on and left the room. Don and Komba followed him. The door closed behind them.

"Have I mentioned," Eighty-eight said, with the android equivalent of gritted teeth, "how much I *loathe*--"

Repeatedly, Lita said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

1

Not only did no one on the Defense Star want to be assigned to Hangar Bay 7734. No one even wanted to go near it, for fear that its aura of misfortune might permeate their own careers.

For that reason Jakk, Don and Komba had the corridors to themselves as they made the long trek from 7734 to the closest elevator hub (which was not all that close, really). They were careful to act like two peacekeepers transporting a prisoner, because there were security cams everywhere. But they could speak freely.

Don had one gloved hand on a very small part of Komba's massive forearm and was "leading" him down the hallway. Jakk wouldn't have touched the grouchy beast for all the money in the Princess's trust fund. He'd been snarled at once, and that was enough for this lifetime and whatever came after it.

"Something bothering me, kid," Don said. "When you were talking to the old guy back there he said you had to deliver something, and it sounded like he said 'to the Activists.'"

"What's your point?" Jakk said.

"Is that what he said? Cause like I told you before, I don't do business with terrorists."

"Hey Don," Komba said.

"Yeah, pal?"

"It sounds to me like you been thinkin."

"I just wanna know--"

"What I have told you about thinkin, Don?"

"A little goes a long way."

"Good memory. Now why don't you try puttin that shit into practice? Cause I don't give a frakk who we're in business with so long as they meet their fiduciary obligations to us."

"Yeah but--"

"DON."

"All right, sure. We'll revisit this at a later date."

"You can revisit it whenever the frakk you want. You and somebody who gives a shit."

They walked on in silence, nearing the end of the corridor.

"Don't let him fool you," Don told Jakk. "His heart's in the right place."

2

Meanwhile Xen was making his way toward the control panel at which he could disable the tractor beam.

He couldn't risk using the hallways. In his desert robes he would have attracted too much of the wrong kind of attention. Instead he was moving through the guts of the Defense Star: cramped, dark spaces full of pipes and wires and machinery. It made for slow and difficult passage, and his old man's body was protesting vehemently the various inconveniences to which it was being subjected.

Such as: Right now he was on a narrow walkway inside an enormous ventilation shaft. The walkway had been made for androids, not humans. There was no guard rail and there were no hand-holds. There was enough light for Xen to see that the shaft was deep; there was no way to know just how deep.

An android could use electromagnets in its feet to cling to the metal surface of the walkway. Xen's only safe choice was to crawl. His palms and knees and back were none too happy about it.

He was halfway across when the hatch at the far end opened, admitting an android whose silvery skin gleamed even in this poor light. "Oh, hello," it said, for its optical sensors easily picked out Xen in the gloom.

"I beg your pardon," the old man said. "I seem to have gotten myself both lost and in a bit of a fix."

"Can I help you?"

"It would be greatly appreciated."

"I don't mind at all. Actually it's nice to see a human for a change. I'm used to being surrounded by my own kind all day. Gets a little monotonous."

The android clomped its way over to Xen, its steps echoing loudly in the shaft. When it got close it stopped and extended a hand. "Grab on," it said, "and I'll get you the rest of the way over in no tiiiiiii"

With a flick of his hand Xen pushed the android off the walkway. The shiny metal figure disappeared into the abyss. Xen waited, and waited, until finally he heard a satisfying smashing sound. There was nothing like wanton destruction to lift one's spirits.

It was good to know he wasn't as much out of practice as he'd feared. Before this morning it had been a long time since Xen had used the Power, and when the mind trick hadn't worked on Jakk, he'd worried that his abilities were irreversibly diminished. But no. He'd only needed a little time to warm up.

It helped, no doubt, that he was on the Defense Star, the embodiment of everything he hated. And that Brace Pulsar was here as well. Xen felt stronger every minute. More like his old nasty self.

His aches and pains forgotten, his frustration set aside, he scampered the rest of the way to the hatch.

The faux-peacekeepers and their faux-prisoner found the hub and got on the elevator that would take them to the celebrity suite. It was a long way up, and the elevator was slow.

"So nineteen, huh kid?" Don asked.

Jakk nodded.

"Hell, we're practically the same age."

"Don't do this, Don," Komba warned.

"Really?" Jakk said. "Cause you look old, man. What are you, like, 25?"

"Good guess," Komba said.

"Yeah?"

"No, dumbass."

"He doesn't mean that," Don said. "The thing is, kid, I've been think--"

Komba cleared his throat.

"C'mon, pal, this is serious now. I've been thinking about what you said, kid, about how if you have to kill somebody, you might as well have some fun with it."

"That ain't what he said, Don."

"And I wasn't too crazy about that idea at first, but then I realized: Jakk's right. Life is short. If you've already decided you're gonna kill some Altrus--"

"Some what?" Jakk said.

"Altrus?" Komba said.

"Did I say Altrus? I meant asshole."

"Who's Alt—" Jakk began.

"Point is, if you're set on killing some asshole, there's nothing more you can do for them. They're already dead, basically. So you might as well think about yourself. You're the one who has to find a way to go on, not the stupid Al...sshole. Not the dead guy. And it'll be easier if you can look back on the killing, you know, fondly, right? Instead of being plagued by guilt over an act of senseless violence. So thanks, kid, for helping me get a new perspective on things. I'm really looking forward to this now."

"Okay," Jakk said.

"Frakk's sake," Komba said.

A gentle tone sounded and the elevator stopped moving. The door opened and Jakk and Don burst into the lobby that served this bank of suites. They started firing the second they were clear of the door and they didn't stop until the room was a ruin and everyone else in it was dead. Furniture was torn to shreds. Equipment sparked and sputtered. The complimentary buffet looked like an abstract expressionist painting. The carpets and walls and ceiling were scarred by laser fire.

Turns out there had only been one person in the lobby, and he was no longer identifiable as much of anything.

An alarm pulsed urgently.

Jakk took off his helmet. He looked ecstatic. "That was--"

"--awesome!" Don said. "I mean holy--"

"Gimme that," Komba said, grabbing Don's rifle. Starting in the nearest corner of the room and working his way around, he shot out every door panel and security cam, as well as the speaker that was emitting the alarm sound. He looked at Don pointedly as he gave back the gun. Then he turned and spoke to Jakk.

"Go find your frakkin Princess, farm boy. Try not to kill her."

Watching Jakk head down a corridor, Don and Komba were startled by a disembodied female voice.

"BL810, please report. Are you there, BL810? What's all the commotion?"

They followed the sound to a spot on the floor where lay a PC that had once belonged to the scattered protoplasm formerly known as BL810. The man must have turned it on just before he was killed.

"Is everything all right up there?" the voice went on. "BL810, do you need help?"

Don picked up the PC and spoke into it. "BL810 here, everything's fine. No help necessary, repeat, no help necessary. We're all fine, everything's fine. How are you?"

A brief silence. Then the voice replied, "Acknowledged, BL810. Thanks for clarifying." The connection was terminated.

"Great," Don said.

"Not great," Komba said.

"Didn't you hear her?"

"Damn right I heard her. And you know who she sounded like, Don? She sounded like Jhutha when she told you she didn't sleep with that other guy."

"Jhutha? What? I don't understand."

"The woman on the PC was lyin her ass off. Just like Jhutha was lyin. There's gonna be a frakkload of peacekeepers here any minute now."

"But how'd she figure it out?"

"Cause unlike your ex, Don, you're a terrible liar."

"I am *not*," Don said.

"See what I mean?"

Jakk found the door to the celebrity suite. His hand went up to the access panel, but then he caught himself.

Princess Kia. Behind that door. In the flesh.

He'd been carrying his helmet; suddenly it seemed wise to put it back on.

"Think shitty thoughts," he urged himself. "Dead babies. Rotten food. That time you walked in on Geniver and Marten...."

He screwed up his courage and opened the door. Kia was standing right there.

Jakk fumbled his helmet off and vomited.

"Hello," Kia said. "I guess."

"Sorry," Jakk said, wiping his mouth.

"Aren't you a little squeamish to be a peacekeeper? Or am I really that repulsive?"

"What? No. It's a condition. A medical-- Never mind. My name's Jakk Spacebreaker and I'm here to break you out of this" -- he looked around the room -- "this...horrible...place?"

"Cool," Kia said. "But who the hell ARE you? You're not an Activist."

"I'm with Xen Watanabi."

The Princess's face lit up. "Xen? Xen is here? Where is he? I have to see him!"

She pushed past him into the hallway and was nearly trampled by Don and Komba, who were in full retreat and under heavy fire from a phalanx of peacekeepers.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Brace Pulsar returned to the bridge as abruptly as he'd left it.

Stobbs was in the middle of giving orders to an officer when the President came in. The Secretary acknowledged his superior with a glance and then took his time finishing what he was doing.

The officer left with her orders. Stobbs turned to face the President, his expression a model of unctuousness.

"Xen Watanabi is on the Defense Star," Brace said.

Stobbs was shocked, although he hid it well. "You've seen him?"

"I sense him. The Power is never wrong about such things."

"I have to admit I thought him long dead."

"That was the accepted truth. But I knew he was out there, somewhere, biding his time."

"And he's here now for the Princess," Stobbs said.

"What else could it be?"

"Can you track him with your...talent? If so I'll arrange for a squadron to take him into custody."

"Fool," Brace said. "Ten squadrons wouldn't be enough."

"Twenty then? Thirty?"

"It was just a figure of speech."

"I see."

"Xen and I have unfinished business. I must deal with him personally."

"I've heard stories," Stobbs said, "about peacekeepers who have lost limbs in the line of duty. Many of them complain about the maddening itching sensations they experience in parts of their bodies that no longer exist. The constant itching, they say, hour after hour, day after day, is far worse than any pain they felt at the moment of...severance."

Stobbs was pleased to see a glint appear in the President's eyes.

"Are you familiar with this phenomenon, Mister President?"

"I am familiar with what a laser sword can do to flesh and bone. Pray to the god of your choosing, Mister Secretary, that you never learn."

"Indeed," Stobbs said, while using his right hand to scratch his left.

"Tell your personnel they are not to interfere with Watanabi in any way."

"Excuse me, sirs," said an approaching officer, "but we have reports of a disturbance near the celebrity suite. Shots have been fired. Hundreds of them, apparently."

"Xen is not alone, then," the President said. "Perhaps your squadrons can be of use after all, Mister Secretary."

"Seal off the area," Stobbs ordered the officer. The young man left to see to it.

"Trouble with your hand?" Brace asked, for Stobbs was still scratching. "A persistent itch?"

The Secretary forced his hands apart. "It's nothing," he said.

"I hope you're right," the President said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

1

While Jakk was off looking for the Princess, Don and Komba got into an extended discussion about Jhutha, the woman who'd upended Don's life. The discussion consisted mostly of Don asking questions and Komba telling him to let it frakkin go already. During all this time Komba kept having a nagging feeling that he'd forgotten something important.

Then a whole frakkload of peacekeepers arrived in the lobby via the elevator. That was when Komba remembered what he'd forgotten, which was to disable the elevator so that a whole frakkload of peacekeepers couldn't use the motherfrakkin thing.

After that, Don (who was the only one armed) engaged in a very brief gunfight with the peacekeepers. It was brief because Don and Komba quickly realized that if they didn't get the hell out of the lobby they would soon be dead.

They retreated down the same corridor Jakk had taken to Kia's suite. They backed their way toward the suite as quickly as they could, with Don covering them. When they got near the suite they turned to make a run for the door. But no sooner had they turned than they found themselves bearing down on Kia. Don and Komba pulled up hard to avoid trampling her, and then the three of them took cover.

2

Komba hid behind the door to the celebrity suite, blocking the entry with his bulk and forcing Don and Kia to improvise.

"Over there!" Kia said, pushing Don toward the room across the hall.

"Hey!" Don said. He didn't like being pushed, even by a woman with a trust fund.

They used the door to shelter themselves. Laser fire bracketed the hall.

Kia took a good look at Don, and Don returned the favor. Sparks flew. But these were the kind that would just as soon burn you to a crisp as inflame your loins.

"This rescue kind of sucks," Kia said, "you gorgeous hunk of maleness."

"Maybe you'd prefer captivity," Don said, "you walking sex bomb."
Sparks!

3

Don and Kia's exchange was observed from across the hall. Jakk said, "Not sure how I feel about that." Komba just shook his head.

Then, while Jakk was still distracted, Komba grabbed the young man's gun and started shooting at peacekeepers.

"See if your android buddies can find us a way outta here," Komba said.

Jakk snapped out of his reverie. He spoke into his PC: "Eighty-eight! We're trapped outside the celebrity suite. We can't get back to the lobby. Tell Lita to plot us an alternate route ASAP!"

4

"You heard the asshole," Eighty-eight told Lita.

"What was that?" said Jakk's voice over Eighty-eight's PC.

"Never mind!" Eighty-eight said, before switching off the device. He turned to Lita. "Hurry up, will you? I wouldn't want my lord to die of multiple laser wounds."

Lita giggled.

Then a tone sounded and the intercom near the office door lit up.

"This is MBO9 requesting entry. Something's wrong with the door panel."

The androids looked at each other.

"Hello?" the voice on the intercom said.

Eighty-eight and Lita waited.

"No one in there I guess," the voice said.

"Do a manual override," a second voice responded.

"Right," the first voice said.

"Oh shit," Eighty-eight said.

5

"I lost contact with Eighty-eight!" Jakk informed the others.

"Great," Komba said between trigger-pulls. "Now what?"

Kia asked Don, "What kind of idiot doesn't have a backup plan, you luscious piece of man candy?"

"What kind of asshole pisses off the guy who's saving her, you beautiful blazing hypergiant star?"

A laser bolt burst just centimeters away, giving them both a shock.

"Give me your rifle," Kia said.

"Why?"

She grabbed the gun out of his hands, leaned around the doorway and shot the closest peacekeeper. "That's why," she said, taking cover again.

Don was unimpressed. "One down, 17 to go. You know why 17? Because I've already killed six others." He grabbed the rifle from her and leaned around the doorway and fired. "Make it seven."

"You're amazing all right," Kia said. "You run for your life faster than anyone I've ever seen."

"You try taking on two squadrons with one gun!"

"If it had been me taking them on we wouldn't have needed more than one gun!"

The battle raged on. Kia shot another peacekeeper before Don yanked her back behind the door.

"What are you doing?"

"My turn!" he said, reaching for the rifle.

"I'm in charge here!"

"In charge of what?"

"One of you frakkers better shoot somebody," Komba yelled over.

Don grabbed the gun. Kia wouldn't let go. They struggled and fell into the corridor.

They leapt to their feet, still both holding the rifle, and unleashed a torrent of fire in the direction of the peacekeepers.

"YAAAA!" Don said.

"GAAAA!" Kia said.

They shot three peacekeepers and forced back the others. In the sudden lull the Princess and the pilot ducked behind the door again. Neither of them would let go of the gun.

"Just give it to me!" Kia said. "I know how to get us out of here."

"If I give it to you I'll never get it back!" Don said.

"Stop being petty!"

"Stop telling me what to do!"

The peacekeepers had regrouped and were coming up the hall, weapons blazing.

"We don't have time for this!" Kia said. She grabbed Don's crotch -- gently! -- and then used this distraction to steal back the rifle. "More balls than brains," she said. "I like it."

She let go of his crotch and ducked away as Don pawed at her. She swung the gun around and shot out a panel in the wall next to where Komba was stationed.

"In the chute!" Kia said to the others. "Go!"

"Don't have to tell me frakkin twice," Komba said. He squeezed off a quick pair of shots and then he ran to the hole in the wall. It was the lumbering, staggering run of an overweight creature who didn't get enough exercise.

His plan was to jump through the hole, but it didn't quite work out that way. Basically he tripped and fell in.

It was a human-sized hole before Komba hit it. After that it was big enough for several humans. The bearlike being disappeared into the wall, accompanied by a diminishing cacophony of breaking and crashing sounds.

Kia motioned for Jakk to go next. She turned her weapon on the peacekeepers and kept them at bay while the young man made his escape.

"Now you," Kia said to Don.

"I wanna talk about something first."

"Not now!"

"I think you know what the something is."

"Go, dammit!"

"Why did you take your hand away?" Don cried.

"I will shoot you AND your shapely balls if you DON'T--"

"All right!" he said. And then: "Shapely?"

She dragged him into the hall, protecting him with her body. When they got near the hole he climbed in.

"You don't even know my name," he protested.

Kia kicked at him and he disappeared down the chute.

"It's Doooooooooooooooo" he said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

1

Kia followed Daw down the chute. She slid feet first, on her belly, with the rifle trained on the hole in the wall, so that she'd be ready to kill any peacekeepers who tried to follow her.

None of them was that brave, dammit.

2

Kia had known about the chute behind the panel in the wall because she'd noticed it being used for waste disposal. She fully expected that when she came out of the chute she would drop into a fetid, reeking mass of garbage and possibly raw sewage as well.

Reader, it was so much worse than that.

3

The Princess wondered if Daw would be waiting at the bottom to catch her. And if so, would it be because she was a woman (bad) or because she was rich (also bad) or because she was a woman who was rich through no fault of her own and who also happened to be kind of hot if she did think so herself (maybe not so bad).

And if he did catch her, would she savor the feeling of being pressed against his amazing body and enclosed by his sturdy arms? Or would she feel like smashing his perfect frakking face?

She had lots of time to think about this stuff. It was a long-ass chute.

4

Don's first thought was: I have to catch her!

Ordinarily he wasn't one to spend much time analyzing his motives -- Komba had mostly cured him of that bad habit -- but there was nothing ordinary about what had happened up there in the corridor.

And so, as he stood at the mouth of the chute waiting, he had to ask himself: After I catch her, does that mean we're, like, together all of a sudden? Because I'm not sure I'm ready for that. I mean I'm really into her, but there's also a scenario where I kind of hate her guts.

"Hey Don," Komba said, interrupting this train of thoughts.

"Yeah, pal?"

"You know how sometimes you think you're just thinkin, but really you're sayin all your frakkin thoughts out loud?"

"What the hell is he talking about?" Don said, and while he was distracted, Kia came out of the chute.

She landed awkwardly but she managed to stay on her feet. Her momentum carried her into Don, who caught her and staggered back a step before regaining his balance.

"Hello again," Don said.

Then Kia screamed.

5

"What is it?"

"What's wrong?"

"The frakk, lady?"

Kia struggled to free herself from Don. When she turned to face her companions there was a look of abject horror on her face.

"Look at all this!" she implored, gesturing with her arms to indicate the entire room. Her eyes were wild, her lips trembling.

"I gotta tell you," Don said placatingly, "I've been in a few garbage pits in my time, and this--"

"Do they not recycle ANYTHING?!" Kia cried.

This room was designated Surplus Material Disposal Area No. 7 (Organic Matter Strictly Prohibited). Its walls were 100 meters long. There were chute mouths at regular intervals along all four walls.

The four occupants of the room (*soon to be joined by a fifth*, he typed sinisterly) stood waist-deep in a very large and very wide assortment of containers. Big ones and small ones. Simple ones and elaborate ones. Mass-produced everyday containers and custom-made packaging solutions. They were made of aluminum, glass, cardboard or plastic. And they were all empty. They had served their purposes and--

"They're throwing all this away?!" Kia wailed. "Do they even realize how wasteful--"

She couldn't finish. She sat down, hard, on a pile of boxes, and put her head in her hands. "It's not just containers, either." She raised her head and looked at the others. "I bet there's tons and tons of leftover food sitting in other rooms, waiting to be shipped off to landfills on" -- she shuddered -- "Humeera."

"That is a motherfrakkin shame," Komba said. "Food wasters deserve to frakkin starve."

They looked at each other in a moment of solidarity.

"And the toilets!" Kia said. "Do you think they're composting human waste?!"

"You lost me, there, girl."

"This conversation sucks," Jakk said. He was a simple farm boy who didn't know anything about recycling, composting...toilets. "How about we get the hell outta here?"

"Good idea, kid. Watch this." Don took the rifle from Kia and aimed it at the door.

"No, Daw!" Kia said.

"It's gonna ricochet, asshole," Komba said.

Kia grabbed Don's arm but not in time. All she accomplished was throwing off his aim.

Zing! went the laser bolt. Everyone but Don ducked for cover. There was a loud crunching sound and then...nothing.

"Hah!" Don said. "No ricochet!" He turned to Komba. "Now who's the asshole, pal?"

Komba lifted one arm slowly and pointed at the spot Don had hit. "My vote's for the guy who shot the control panel."

Indeed, the panel that could have opened the door for them was now a smoking, sparking ruin.

"Great," Jakk said. "So now what?"

That was when they learned they weren't alone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

1

A guttural moaning sound filled the room. It came from everywhere and nowhere, taking on a metallic timbre as it bounced off the walls.

"What the hell was THAT?" Jakk said. He and Don and Kia flitted their eyes in Komba's direction.

"Just cause that frakkin sound wasn't human doesn't mean it was me."

"We know that, pal."

"So why you lookin my way, Don?"

"Oh, *Don*," Kia said. Don looked at her strangely and she made a "never mind" gesture.

"Is it cause I'm a big fat motherfrakker?" Komba went on.

"I would never judge someone by how they look," Kia said.

"Hey, something touched my leg," Jakk said.

"Same goes for me, pal," Don said. "You know me better than that."

"Easy for you two skinny little pretty-face assholes to say."

"There's a tentacle on me!" Jakk cried, as a long brown-gray appendage swiftly encircled him.

"Now who's being judged by their appearance?" Kia said.

"Don't start that shit with me," Komba warned her.

"It's going for my--" Jakk tried to say, before the tentacle plunged into his mouth. In the next moment he was dragged beneath the many layers of discarded packaging.

"What shit would that be?" Kia asked.

"Fight nice, now," Don said.

"Shut up, Don," they replied in unison.

"Tell you what, kid..." Don said.

"Kid?"

"Hey, where'd he go?"

Jakk erupted from a pile of containers. "Help!" he cried. He held the tentacle in both hands and was straining mightily to keep it away from his face.

"Jakk!" Kia said.

"Kid!" Don said.

"The frakk good will yellin his name do?" Komba said, pushing his way through an ocean of junk.

The tentacle pulled Jakk under again. Komba reached the spot where Jakk had just been and started throwing containers out of the way.

Kia and Don came over to help. The three of them cleared away a lot of material but they saw no sign of Jakk or the tentacle.

"Where could he be?" Kia said.

"What is that thing?" Don asked.

"The frakk's it doin in this dump?" Komba wanted to know.¹⁰ "And how much can it eat?"

2

Without warning Jakk re-emerged, gasping and struggling to his feet. He was about 10 meters from where he'd gone under, and the tentacle was no longer wrapped around him. The others waded over to help him.

"What happened?" Kia said.

Jakk cleared his throat and spat out the taste of tentacle. "I killed it. Tore it in half," he said, recreating the moment for his audience.

"You're stronger than you look, kid."

"What really happened?" Komba said.

¹⁰ As might you, Reader. Find out in the premiere issue of *Spacebreaker: Tales of the Spacarato*. Coming soon from Dark Horse Comix!

"It let me go."

"Figured."

"But I could have k--"

"Why'd it let you go?" Kia said.

That and any other questions would go unanswered, for just then heavy machinery rattled to life.

"Now what?" Jakk complained. He was still pissed about getting caught in a lie.

The foursome were jostled as the floor began to rise.

"Elevator?" Kia said.

"More like a frakkin crusher," Komba replied, pointing at the ceiling. It was coming down as steadily as the floor was going up.

Don cleared his throat and announced, with great import, "I have a very bad feeling about this."

"Wow, Don," Komba said. "Nice work. You owned the frakk outta that line."

"He gets a little sarcastic," Don said.

3

The floor rose; the ceiling descended. In less than two minutes the humans would become one with the containers.

Komba tried lifting the door. Don and Kia scoured the room for a panel, a switch, anything that might stop the crusher or open an escape hatch. And Jakk tried to contact the androids.

"Eighty-eight! Come in, Eighty-eight! We're in a life-or-death situation and we need your help! Please respond!"

"Eighty-eight!" Jakk's voice blared from the android's PC. "Where the hell are you?!"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Eighty-eight said.

The androids hadn't moved from the hangar bay office. They hadn't done much of anything since the humans left.

Lita knocked out the two peacekeepers who showed up, and right now she was locking them (bound and gagged) in a storage compartment, but other than that...their time had been uneventful. Quiet. Peaceful. And almost entirely Jakk-free.

"Will you please respond?!" his voice cried.

"Eat sand!" Eighty-eight said, knowing his mic was muted. "Better yet, grab a couple handfuls and shove it up your--"

Lita emerged from the storage compartment. She heard Jakk's voice and noticed the PC in Eighty-eight's hand. What's going on? she said.

"Oh, nothing."

Lita waited.

"A little something."

Lita waited. Jakk's pleadings became even more urgent.

Eighty-eight sighed. "If you must know..."

The distance between the floor and the ceiling was four meters and shrinking. Kia and Don and Komba were building stacks of metal containers in the hope these might slow down the crusher, at least for a little bit. Jakk was still yelling into his PC.

"Well, one thing's for sure," Don said. "We're all gonna be a lot thinner."

He looked to Jakk for a reaction. Jakk was busy. Don looked to Kia. She wouldn't make eye contact. Finally he turned to Komba, who could only shake his head.

"What?" Don said. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Eighty-eight!!" Jakk screamed, his voice cracking.

"Yes, hello?" came the android's voice.

Jakk was so excited he almost couldn't speak. "Shut down the crusher in Surplus Material Disposal Area Number Seven! Hurry!!"

"Sure. Of course. What number was that again?"

"SEVEN!"

Jakk's voice rasped. This was followed by a prolonged coughing fit.

That was cruel, Lita told Eighty-eight.

"Hell yes it was," he replied.

8

Jakk coughed so long and so hard that he nearly blacked out. When he came to all he could hear were screams.

9

The androids heard the same screams...and then nothing.

"Please tell me you didn't kill them," Eighty-eight said in a panic.

I didn't, Lita said. But you might have.

An extremely tense moment passed.

"Good job, you two!" came Don's voice over the PC. "Not a fraction of a parsec too late."

"Oh thank GOD!" Eighty-eight cried, collapsing into a chair. "Oh thank heavens. Oh goodness gracious."

"Now hurry up and open the door so we can get out of here," Don said.

"Right away, Captain," Eighty-eight said.

He turned to Lita. "Annnnnd just like that we're back to being the help."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

1

"How lovely," Xen said. "Another catwalk."

After a dark, cramped, circuitous and harrowing journey through the bowels of the Defense Star, the old man had finally reached his destination. Covered with grime and reeking of something fetid, he'd squeezed through a small opening and dropped down into a bowl-shaped chamber. Fortunately he landed on the rim of the basin, or his story (and ours) would have ended prematurely.

Suspended above the center of the concavity was a small reactor. It hummed loudly and it glowed with crackling blue energy.

This was the device that powered the Defense Star's tractor beams. A thin energy ray passed out of a conduit beneath the reactor and through an opening in the bottom of the bowl. From that point the ray was diffused and directed to the many tractor beam stations. Excess energy pooled in the basin, where it roiled and sparked, promising sure death to anyone who fell in.

Thus the catwalk: Xen's only means of reaching the reactor and shutting it down. Had the task entailed merely pulling a lever, Xen could have used the Power. But according to Lita there was a complicated sequence of actions required.

There were two catwalks, actually, on opposite sides of the reactor. They were joined to, and served as supports for, the apparatus that suspended the device above the basin.

Xen went to the nearest catwalk and took an exploratory step out onto it. He was zapped in the ankle by a random bolt of excess energy. He struggled for balance and nearly fell.

Retreating to the safety of the rim, he rubbed his wounded joint and prepared himself for another attempt.

This time he tried crawling. More crawling! As if he hadn't done enough of that today. "All for the cause..." he said with something like bemusement.

He made about a meter's worth of progress before he was zapped again, on the left hand.

And then on the right hand.

And then on the left again as he scooted back to his starting point.

Eyeing the catwalk balefully, Xen tried to shake the sting out of his extremities.

The energy in the basin popped and snapped.

"Very well, then," the old man said.

Still on his knees, he drew his laser sword and sliced through the catwalk.

It crashed into the basin and was enveloped by the seething blue mass. Then the apparatus holding the reactor gave way and that fell in as well. The other catwalk snapped and then the entire ungainly assembly passed through the opening at the bottom of the bowl and disappeared from sight.

"Crude," Xen said, "but effective."

He stood up and straightened his robe. If he was worried that the reactor would blow up, taking part or all of the Defense Star with it, the old man gave no sign.

There was no way for him to know that the device had been safeguarded against such a possibility. He simply believed that his fate did not lie along such a path.

His work was done, and he needn't bother sneaking around anymore. He could sense the President as clearly as Brace could sense him. His old enemy sought him and now Xen was ready to be found. He was eager to meet up with his former student. Very eager indeed.

"This time I won't stop at arms and legs," he said. "This time I'll cut him into little pieces."

Xen left the chamber by the main door.

2

Outside Surplus Material Disposal Area No. 7, Kia pretended not to be watching while Jakk and Don shed their peacekeeper armor.

She focused more on Don because studying Jakk's body gave her a feeling she couldn't quite grok. Not quite pleasant, not quite unpleasant. Certainly not unpleasant enough to be alluring. More like a feeling of meh. If she went up to Jakk right now and slapped his face, he'd probably get mad and ask her why she did that. Whereas if she did the same thing to Don, he'd slap her right back. Or worse. So much, much worse...

And then, just when the scene playing out in her mind was getting interesting, Don went and did something dumb.

3

So Don and Jakk were removing their armor, and the Princess was sneaking looks at them, and they were sneaking looks at her, to see which of them she favored -- but also sneaking looks at each other, because each one wanted to see how his counterpart was reacting to the Princess's covert glances...

...And Komba felt like gathering up the three of them and tossing them back into the disposal area.

But of course he couldn't do that. Don owed him money, and Kia was rich, and Jakk...

Actually, frakk Jakk.

Komba was so disgusted by his companions' behavior that he didn't notice the tiny android rolling up to him on its tiny wheels.

And the android didn't notice Komba because it was a defective model that no one had had time to repair. So instead of darting past Komba's large, hairy foot, which was squarely in its path, the little android plowed right into it at high speed.

"The frakk?" Komba said quietly, more startled than hurt.

The android bounced off his foot, paused to get its bearings, and then rammed the foot again.

That time it did hurt a little, and Komba responded by trying clumsily to stomp the android.

Don mistook Komba's annoyance for something more like distress. To help his friend and to impress the Princess, Don brought his rifle to bear on the source of the trouble.

"Don't!" Kia whisper-yelled. "The sound!"

Don blasted the android into oblivion, which made a lot of noise that echoed a long way down the corridor. Then he smiled at Kia, who did not smile back.

"What the hell do you think you're doing," she said, "you looming tower of lust?"

"Whatever the hell I wanna do, my wild Aventian rose."

"Not while I'm in charge."

"Who says you're in charge?"

Kia made a cupping gesture, and Don blushed. Komba rolled his eyes and Jakk grabbed his stomach.

"That's who," the Princess said. "Now let's get out of here."

She stormed off, followed by Komba and then Jakk. Don watched them go.

"Tell you what," he said, his features contorting as he worked himself up. "She is gonna push me too far, and then I am gonna smash...my...face? Into her...fist? No, her face? No. What? I'm so confused!"

Helplessly smitten, hopelessly unhappy, he ran to catch up with the others.

4

Elsewhere, a pair of project managers walked side by side down a corridor, deeply wrapped up in conversation.

They'd been working nonstop for the past two days, putting out fires -- some of them literal -- troubleshooting problems large and small, trying to keep their crews productive and happy, and just generally sweating over every detail that might affect the Defense Star's performance.

"What's the status of the blast doors for the thermal exhaust port?" the first one said.

"What blast doors?" replied the second.

"Really?"

"When they didn't show up I did some checking, and it turns out the order was cancelled."

"Why?"

The second project manager shrugged.

"Who?"

"Someone looking to save money? I dunno."

"Huh," the first project manager said.

At this point an old man in dirty robes walked by, but the pair were too absorbed in their discussion to notice.

"It's not the end of the world, I guess," the second project manager said. "I mean, even if we are attacked someday, what are the odds of an enemy ship getting through all the other defenses and being able to hit that little target with a photon torpedo? Astronomical, right?"

"Yeah," replied the first project manager, amused by the craziness of the idea. "One in a trillion, at least."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

1

When Don caught up to the others, they'd reached a place where two corridors met to form a T. They had to go right at this intersection, but first they had to be sure the hallway was clear.

Kia peeked around the corner. "Okay," she said, "let's go."

Jakk was right behind her, followed by Komba. Don brought up the rear.

"Seems like nobody heard all that NOISE I made back there," he said. "So maybe you OVERREACTED a little bit, Your HIGHNESS."

He stopped and waited, but Kia didn't acknowledge him. Nor did anyone else.

He gestured rudely in their direction, and then he ran after them.

2

They made their way back to Hangar Bay 7734 with zero trouble. It seemed more than a little odd that they encountered no one from the IP, not even an android.

Perhaps there was something big going on and all personnel were at their stations. Maybe the entire crew was in a meeting.

Kia had suffered through many sessions of the IP Board, and she'd heard the horror stories about the weekly or even daily meetings to which many government employees were subjected. After Activism had triumphed, after the tyrannical Chairman and his management team had been overthrown, there would be a decree: No more meetings!

Well, not a decree. That would be authoritarian and elitist. Not what Activism was all about. So there would have to be a -- not a meeting -- an assembly of some sorts where the issue of banning meetings could be discussed.

Actually, two assemblies. The first one would deal with the question of whether there should be a second assembly, at which the issue of banning meetings could be discussed.

No, make that three assemblies. The first one -- the new first one -- would raise the question of whether it was okay to proceed with the second assembly. You had to allow for the possibility that the people didn't want any of this. And if they said they didn't, you had to explain to them why that was not the best choice.

But presuming that the first assembly did rule in favor of, well, itself, then the members of that assembly could proceed.

They could debate the matter of whether a second assembly was needed to discuss the need for convening a third assembly at which the issue of banning meetings could be addressed.

Democracy in action! The Princess got goosebumps thinking about it.

3

She was less enthused by her first look at the Aeon Terodakta, which came as they crossed a walkway high above the hangar.

"That's your ship?"

"Damn right it's my ship," Don said. "Our ship," he added after a look from Komba.

"Kind of small, isn't it?"

"She's got it where it counts. Just like me."

"She's also had some work done," Komba said. "Just like you."

"He's messing with me," Don explained.

"Am I?"

"A little work never hurt anybody," Kia said.

"I'm sick and tired of all this clever banter," Jakk said. "I feel like a fourth wheel."

Perplexed glances were exchanged but nothing was said.

"I'm gonna go ahead while you three play your stupid games." He marched up to the door and punched the access button.

The door opened to reveal a single peacekeeper, who was as startled by the sight of them as they were by him.

"Frakk!" Jakk said, jumping back.

"Shit!" the peacekeeper cried.

"Kill him!" Kia said.

Jakk fumbled with his gun. The peacekeeper panicked and fled.

"Don and me'll get him," Komba said, gesturing to Don for the rifle.

"We'll meet you two at the ship," Don said, handing over the weapon and drawing his pistol.

They ran off.

"Well this just got boring," Kia complained. "Nothing personal," she added.

"Piece of shit rifle," Jakk said, practicing his raise-and-shoot technique. "That's never happened to me before, you know."

She smiled in a way that was infuriatingly sympathetic.

"Wanna blow some shit up?" Jakk asked. "We have time."

"Sure, what the frakk," Kia said.

The fleeing peacekeeper shouted into his PC: "This is JP111, I'm under attack in Sector 40. Request immediate assistance!"

From behind him -- not close, but gaining -- came the inhuman howling and thudding steps of his pursuers.

5

"Why the. Frakk. Are you. Yellin. Don?"

"Psych warfare," Don said. "Scare the. Shit out of him."

"Makin. Him. Run. Faster?"

"You said don't. Think too much."

Komba scowled and tried to keep up.

6

"JP111, this is squad leader," the fleeing peacekeeper heard. "Request acknowledged. Proceed to Sector 41. Over."

Underneath his panic JP111 felt a sense of relief. Sector 41 was just around the corner.

When he got to the double doors separating the sectors, he stopped and hit the 'Open' button on the panel. Then he turned to face the enemy. He raised his rifle and whispered into his PC: "Here they come, squad leader."

Behind him he could hear the slow churning of the motors that opened the double doors.

He readjusted his grip on the gun.

Around the corner came the attackers: a roguishly handsome human and an enormous, bearlike thing. They were caught off guard by the sight of JP111 and they skidded awkwardly to a stop. The bear ran into the human and they both dropped their weapons.

"Freeze!" JP111 said. He didn't care if peacekeepers weren't supposed to say that. It felt too good to pass up.

The double doors were open and JP111 could sense his squad mates behind him, ready to rain fire.

"Eat it, assholes," he said to the enemy.

They stood there, helpless.

"JP111," came the squad leader's voice, "we're ready in Sector 21. Where are you? Over."

That sense of his squad mates standing behind him? All at once JP111 wasn't getting it.

He looked over his shoulder and confirmed that he was alone.

"Twenty-one?" he said into the PC. "Forty-one, squad leader!"

"Damn these earpieces," squad leader said. "Hang tight, we're on our way."

"Actually, don't bother," JP111 said, for his captors had retrieved their weapons, and they were pointing them at him, and he guessed, correctly, that he had less than a second to live.

7

It took Jakk and Kia very little time to find another walkway overlooking a different hangar bay. Sitting in this bay was a sleek, gleaming pleasure craft, the outer-space analog to a yacht. A big-ass, new-looking vessel that was clearly some visiting dignitary's pride and joy.

"Very impressive," Kia said.

"I can't tell how sarcastic you're being," Jakk said.

"Actually...neither can I."

Anyway. The owner was nowhere to be seen. The bay was completely empty. And that meant...

"Target practice!" Jakk said. He and Kia took turns shooting at the ship. They chipped off pieces here and there, and scorched the hull with blast marks.

"This was a great idea."

"More fun than chasing down some random peacekeeper, right?"

"You should've seen the look on your face when you saw that guy," Kia said. "You were like 'Whaaaat....'"

"I'm sure Don would've handled it better."

"Who gives a shit about Don?"

"Really?" Jakk said.

"If it cheers you up, sure."

"Oh. So you two are...?"

"Who knows? The cause is what matters to me. Everything else is secondary. And since there's nothing I can do for the cause right now, all I want is to enjoy this moment with you."

"Ugh. I mean, great! I mean, augh."

"Boy," Kia said, "talk about mixed signals."

"You two over there!" said a voice to their right. "What do you think you're doing?"

They turned to see a pair of peacekeepers pointing rifles at them.

"What *are* we doing?" Kia said.

She looked at Jakk. They exchanged shrugs.

"Frakking the frakk off," Jakk said. He grabbed her arm and they ran, dodging laser fire, sporting a pair of big old shit-eating grins.

They couldn't lead the peacekeepers to the Terodakta. They'd have to shake them and then double back.

So they ran away from the ship and toward nothing in particular, exchanging fire with the peacekeepers as they went.

Soon they found themselves in an octagonal hub. Eight paths to choose from, not much time in which to decide, and no idea what might be behind any of the doors.

"Just pick one," Jakk said.

"I can't decide."

"No surprise there."

"Hey!" Kia protested.

They heard the peacekeepers coming. Jakk pulled Kia through the nearest door. It opened on an air shaft extending up as far as the eye could see. The shaft's shiny metal walls were dotted with multicolored lights blinking in seemingly random patterns.

"Watch it!" Kia warned.

The walkway ended abruptly just a few meters beyond the door. Kia and Jakk stopped at the precipice. Below them the shaft stretched down into a black abyss and certain death.

A laser bolt zinged past them, bringing them back to the moment. The peacekeepers were coming on fast. Kia pressed a button to shut the door.

"How do I lock it?"

"Back away," Jakk said.

He blasted the control panel.

"That buys us some time."

"But that panel controlled the walkway, too."

"What?!"

"We can't extend it now."

"Why'd you let me do such a Don thing?!"

"Did you say 'Don'?" Kia asked.

"What?"

A wrenching, groaning sound from behind them got their attention. They saw that the door had been raised about four centimeters via the manual override.

"We have to do something!" Jakk said.

A laser bolt exploded near them.

They ducked for cover and traced the path of the bolt back to its origin, a door on the opposite side of the air shaft. A peacekeeper stood there shooting at them.

"Take this!" Jakk said, tossing Kia the rifle. "Cover me!"

She began exchanging fire with the peacekeeper.

"What are you doing?" Kia said, while Jakk removed something from his belt.

"I have an idea."

"Why'd you say 'a Don thing'?"

"Jealousy I guess."

"Makes sense," Kia said. She hit the peacekeeper in the chest and he tumbled off the walkway to his doom.

"I don't mean that in a bad way."

"Didn't take it that way," Jakk said.

The door was raised a few more centimeters. The boots of several peacekeepers were visible in the gap.

"Whatever you're gonna do, hurry!" Kia said.

Jakk had a length of cord with a grappling hook attached to it. He flung the hook out over the chasm. It wrapped itself around a stanchion and held fast.

"Swing?" Kia said incredulously.

Jakk shrugged.

"I love it!" She leapt into his arms. He began to convulse. "Oh god," he said miserably, "you feel so frakking good."

"What is up with you, really?"

"Gimme a break, I'm only nineteen!"

"Hey, me too. When's your birthday?"

Before he could reply the door groaned again and they saw a peacekeeper poke a rifle through the gap.

"Go!" Kia cried.

They swung across the chasm, their bodies pressed tight. They dropped down on the other side. Kia gave Jakk a quick kiss on the cheek. "Nice job."

"Thanks," Jakk said, and then he collapsed.

"Come on!" she said, opening the door. She hauled him to his feet and he stumbled after her. They exited the air shaft and started their way back to the hangar.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

1

Xen felt a tingling in his bones. He was just outside the hangar bay where the Terodakta was docked, but he knew he would never set foot on that ship again. His destiny lay elsewhere.

He relaxed and let the Power flow through him. The tingling intensified. It became something more like a gravitational force, turning him, pulling him toward...

The storage annex. He would find what he sought in there.

Xen drew his sword.

As he approached the door it opened seemingly of its own accord. Xen waited patiently for the room to reveal its secret.

And there in the annex, with his own sword at the ready, stood Brace Pulsar.

2

"Hiro Watanabi," the President said. "Despite everything we've been through... despite what you did to me...I'm happy to see you."

Xen's reaction was part bewilderment, part suspicion. He said nothing.

"I never believed you were dead, old friend. How good it feels to be proved right."

Xen smiled.

"You haven't changed, have you Brace?" The smile became a snarl. "You remain a sanctimonious PRICK!"

With that he charged, unleashing a series of slashes and thrusts. He felt fully energized now. He moved with speed, agility and deadly intent.

Brace met him on equal terms. He had the advantage of being younger; also of having not withered away on Tanix for two decades. But his robotic arms and legs, state of the art though they were, couldn't move as fluidly as flesh and bone. The first exchange quickly reached a stalemate.

The combatants paused. Their swords hummed quietly. There was a strong smell of ozone in the air.

"Still an amazing swordsman," Brace said. "You've forgotten more than I'll ever know."

"You're too kind. Now FRAKK OFF AND DIE!"

Xen attacked. Brace responded. Thrust and parry, lunge and feint, hack and slash. A whole lotta hacking and slashing.

The swords met with brilliant bursts of light. The tinny sounds of laser-on-laser violence filled the room.

"Your skills are mediocre, Mister *President*," Xen taunted. "All that time we spent in training and this is what you have to show for it?"

"Baiting me won't work. I'm not as volatile as the man you once knew."

"In other words, you're weak."

"I won't stoop to invective. Can't we resolve this some other way?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? It would make things so much easier. But I'm not going to give you the satisfaction, Brace. You have to kill or be killed."

"You were like a father to me, Hiro."

"Then I should have killed your mother while she was PREGNANT."

The President gasped and his eyes widened. Xen sneered with malevolent glee.

The battle raged on.

3

Kia and Jakk collected the androids and then those four met up with Komba and Don outside the hangar bay. Among the humans there were hugs all around, which wasn't awkward, no siree.

Komba stood off to the side and smirked.

"I wouldn't mind a hug," Eighty-eight said, with his optical sensors trained squarely on Don.

Not going to happen, Lita said. Move on.

'Easy for you to say. The galaxy is full of OSes. But there's only one of him."

How much RAM do you think he has?

"Stop it. Just stop it."

4

"Did either of you see Xen?" Jakk asked Don and Komba.

Head shakes. "I hope he disabled that beam," Don said, "or we're not gonna get anywhere."

"Figure that out all by yourself?" Komba said.

They surveilled the bay. "No guards at all?" Kia said. "I don't get it. First the empty hallways--"

"What's not to get?" Don said. "Finally something went our way. Let's go before anyone shows up."

Kia gave Don the stink-eye. Jakk pretended not to care.

5

They hurried to the ship. Movement off to the right caught Jakk's eye. "Hey!" he called to the others. "Look!"

Across the bay, Xen and Brace dueled fiercely.

"Kid," Don said, "this is our only chance. We gotta move!"

Komba herded the androids up the ramp. Kia came to Jakk's side.

"We should help him," Jakk said.

"No, Don's right."

Jakk looked at her.

"For once."

6

Xen raised his sword high and brought it down with all his might. The President raised his own sword to block. The beams clashed and neither man faltered.

For a portentous moment they held that position, straining against each other, staring each other down.

Xen heard Jakk's voice and flitted his eyes in that direction. In an instant he realized that the time had come, that his destiny was at hand.

He glanced at Jakk, holding his eyes for just a moment. Then he turned his gaze on his enemy.

"Watch carefully now, Brace, and perhaps you'll learn a thing. In which case your apprenticeship won't have been a complete failure."

The President steeled himself for a new attack.

One that never came. Instead Xen raised his own sword. Then, while Brace was distracted, Xen used the Power to take control of the President's arm.

The old man brought Brace's sword up and slammed it down into his own head. The laser sliced through his skull and kept going all the way to the crotch, cutting Xen neatly in half. The halves stood there a moment, trembling, smiling in a fractured fashion, and then they peeled away from each other and fell to the floor.

The three witnesses to this horror said in unison: "HOLY SHIT!"

They stared at each other across the bay.

"It wasn't--" Brace began. "I didn't--"

"I DON'T CARE!" Jakk cried. He drew his rifle and started shooting.

The President used his sword to deflect the bolts.

"Kid!" Don called from the ramp. "Kia!"

"We have to go!" Kia told Jakk.

He stopped firing. He stared hatefully at the President while Kia dragged him into the ship.

"HE DID IT TO HIMSELF!" Brace said.

"Well that's a shitty thing to say!" Jakk called back.

"Don't you have any respect for the dead?" Kia added.

"No I mean literally!" Brace said, but it was too late. Kia and Jakk disappeared up the ramp.

CHAPTER FORTY

1

The Terodakta passed out of the hangar bay and accelerated. The immensity of the Defense Star loomed behind the speeding ship.

With the cockpit to themselves, Don and Komba monitored instruments and made adjustments. The tension was so thick you could describe it with words.

"Here we go," Don said. "Either the old guy did his job and turned off the tractor beam..."

Komba locked eyes with him.

"...or this is gonna be a very short escape."

Komba said nothing.

"What was wrong with that?"

"You feel us gettin pulled apart by the beam, Don?"

"No. Do you?"

"I don't."

Komba waited.

"Hey," Don said. He checked the readouts. "Hey, you're right. We survived! Xen came through for us! He turned off the tractor beam!"

"Oh my frakkin god," Komba said.

2

Back in the hold, the androids maintained a respectful distance while Kia tried to comfort Jakk.

Under the circumstances, she thought it best that she not actually touch him. Her full attention and sympathy would have to suffice.

"I can't believe he's gone."

"There was nothing you could've done."

"I'll miss him so much."

"He'll live on in your memory."

He looked at her. "How does that work?"

She was flummoxed. "I'm not really sure. It's just something people say. I'm new to this death thing too."

What about her planet getting blown up? Lita asked
Eighty-eight.

"Hush!" he scolded her. "I'm trying to eavesdrop."

"You know what I'll always remember?" Jakk said.

"What?"

He made a slicing motion down the middle of his face.

Kia was still formulating a response when the ship went on red alert.

3

"Incoming fighters," Don said. "Take the helm, pal."

He leapt out of his seat and left the cockpit.

"Wait, Don!" Komba said.

Don didn't come back.

"Dumbass."

4

Don poked his head into the hold and looked straight at Jakk. "Duty calls, kid. We got incoming Liberators." He winked at Kia and then he was gone.

Jakk got up and followed.

Kia took all this in silently. Then she turned to the androids.

"What kind of guns does this ship have, Lita?"

Twin Zebo A27 heavy-gauge rapid-fire plasma cannons, maximum effective range 5000 meters.

"So the kind of weapons you'd only find on spacecraft, right?"

That does seem logical.

"*Not* the kind of weapons that, say, a farm boy from Tanix would be likely to have any experience with."

Correct.

"If I can just ask--" Eighty-eight began.

"But maybe the kind that a veteran of the Aventian Youth Defense Force would have used in her training? The kind that such a person would be able to operate with a high degree of proficiency? The kind she could be using right now to protect this ship from attack? If only she hadn't been completely overlooked by its amazingly hot but utterly numb-skulled captain?"

I don't have enough information to address--

"The answer's yes," Kia said.

5

The guns were housed in turrets on opposite sides of the ship. Don went to starboard, Jakk to port.

Don strapped himself into his seat and performed a comm check.

"All set over there, kid?"

"You bet."

"Systems online?"

"Almost."

Don powered up his guns and engaged the targeting mechanism. At the flip of a switch the turret's servo-motors hummed to life.

"Komba, what's their ETA?"

"Twenty seconds."

Don gripped the controls. He rested his feet on the pedals that moved the turret.

"Here they come," Kia said over the comm system. "Four of them."

"This is where it gets fun," Don said.

He frowned.

"This is where the fun part starts."

More frowning. "I gotta work on that one."

6

Kia had joined Komba in the cockpit. She tracked the incoming fighters while he labored over the instruments with a certain urgency.

"How we doing?" she asked.

"We too busy to frakkin talk."

7

The androids remained in the hold, listening in on the comm system.

Kind of exciting, Lita said.

"I'm thrilled beyond words."

8

The Liberators came on at top speed. They split into an attack formation and trained their sights on the Terodakta.

9

"They're in range," Kia said over the comm.

"Get after them, kid," Don said. "Make every shot count."

From the cockpit of his fighter the group leader spoke into his comm. "All units, we are now in range. Maintain attack formation and fire when ready."

He targeted the enemy and squeezed the trigger. The cockpit shuddered as a pair of laser bolts emanated from the Liberator's gun ports. The bolts streaked across the void between hunter and hunted.

The group leader smiled. His aim was true.

But he hit nothing.

Don heard the Terodakta's engines falter. Before he could react everything went blurry and the ship went into hyperwarp.

"What--?" he said. "How--? Komba!"

The group leader stared at the emptiness where his quarry had just been. "What kind of bullshit is that?" he said.

"How did this happen?" said Don's voice over the comm.

"Cause I made it frakkin happen, Don."

"But there wasn't time to calculate a safe course."

"Unless there was."

"I don't understand."

"As I could've told you if you'd stayed in the motherfrakkin cockpit, we didn't need to go far, Don. Just far enough to shake those frakkers. So the calculations weren't that complicated."

"Wow. Pretty smart."

"Don't act so frakkin surprised."

14

In the other turret, Jakk remained strapped into his seat. The straps and the comm system were the only things he'd been able to figure out.

When Don asked if him if he was all set, Jakk was still trying to get himself into the seat. When Don asked if his systems were online, Jakk exaggerated his state of readiness just a tad.

He'd flipped switches and touched buttons in an effort to make something happen with the guns, but apparently there was a specific sequence required. It was a shitty interface, really. Not intuitive at all. Did they think people had all this time on their hands for learning?

He wasn't about to ask Don or anyone else for help, so possibly it was a good thing that the gun battle hadn't taken place. Might have gotten a bit ugly.

Anyway, now that it was all behind him, he gripped the gun controls and pretended to shoot down dozens of enemies.

"Pew pew pew," he said. "Die Activist scum!"

Then he remembered that he was now an Activist, more or less. Whether he knew what it meant or not.

He missed Xen.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

1

Deep in thought, Brace rejoined Stobbs on the bridge.

"Congratulations, Mister President. It seems we have two occasions for celebration."

Brace didn't respond. Lightly peeved, Stobbs continued: "Not only did the Activists escape in accordance with my plan, but now one of the greatest enemies of the IP is dead."

Still no response.

"I watched the whole thing on one of the cams," the Secretary said. "You certainly did a thorough job of dispatching Watanabi. It must have been...cathartic."

"He was a great man, in his way," Brace said.

"He was the embodiment of evil."

"Nonetheless."

"Be that as it may," Stobbs said, "he's gone, and as we speak the escapees are leading us to the base. Victory is almost at hand."

"We'll see."

Stobbs turned away to hide his frustration. His plan was a thing of beauty and it was working perfectly, and all the President could say was "We'll see"? Clearly the man had no appreciation for the subtleties of the stratagem.

It wouldn't have been enough to let the Activists escape. Encountering no resistance they would have sensed that something was wrong. So instead Stobbs had put a few minor obstacles in their path, such as the random peacekeeper in Sector 40.

He was particularly proud of the fighter assault. True, the Activists had confounded that part of the plan by making a short hyperwarp jump, but no matter. The point was that they believed they were under attack. They were at no risk of being destroyed or even seriously damaged, but there was no way for them to know that.

Even the IP pilots hadn't known. The Liberators' cannons had been calibrated to be incapable of penetrating the Activist ship's shields, but the pilots had every reason to think they were firing at full power.

It was a brilliant scheme. But brilliance unrecognized is brilliance diminished, and Stobbs resented Brace for denying him the satisfaction he deserved.

"Tell me something, Stobbs," the President now said. "You're familiar with the rumor about the Princess, correct?"

This question was entirely unexpected, and despite his pique Stobbs couldn't resist playing along. He turned and said, "There are quite a few from which to choose."

"That she was adopted."

"I'm familiar with that one. Are you asking for my opinion about it?"

"Please."

"Her parents were quite old when Kia came into their lives, and she bears no resemblance to either of them."

"And as for the identity of her true parents...?"

"I haven't given it much thought. But something tells me you have."

"Yes, just now, in light of certain things I saw in the hangar bay." The President bowed his head and began pacing. "There was a young man with Kia. And they were both distraught over...Watanabi's death. And in the moments after he died, I felt something unusual."

"What was it?" Stobbs said, truly intrigued now.

"A strange sense of...kinship with those two. A strong but mysterious connection, like nothing I've ever experienced. But I believe I understand it now."

"Please don't keep me in suspense."

"Excuse me sirs," interrupted an officer. "The enemy ship has entered the Yoma system."

"Set our course, then," Stobbs told her.

The President waited for her to leave, and then Stobbs waited for Brace to speak.

"I think Watanabi was Kia's true father, and I think the man I saw her with was her husband. And the reason I felt connected to them was that they loved the old man as I once did."

"An intriguing theory, Mister President."

Brace nodded. "The more I think about it, the more obvious it seems."

2

Don and Jakk met up outside the cockpit.

"Don't worry, kid," Don said, as they stepped inside, "we'll get them next time."

"If there even is a next time," Jakk grumbled.

"It'll be here sooner than you think," Kia said.

"I thought we made a clean escape."

"They can't find us that quickly," Don said. "For all they know we could be on the other side of the galaxy."

"Oh, come on, Don," Kia said. "It's so obvious they're tracking us."

"Tracking?" Don said. "Impossible."

"It's not obvious to me," Jakk said.

"Would explain some things," Komba said.

"Thank you," Kia told him. She smiled smugly at Don, who gave Komba a betrayed look.

"Tracking?" Don repeated. "Not the Terodakta, sister."

"Yeah," Jakk said, "not *this* ship, sister."

That gave him a weird feeling, and he grew quiet.

Kia got a similarly weird feeling, but she didn't have time to dwell on it. "That escape was too easy. Wherever we go next, the Defense Star is sure to follow. All we can hope to do is deliver the data in time for someone to figure out how to destroy that thing."

"All *you* can hope to do, you mean," Don said. "Me and Komba's involvement ends when we drop you off and collect our money."

"Oh, so this is about money, then."

"I just said it was."

"Money is all you care about, huh?"

"'All' is kind of a loaded term..."

"No, that's right," Komba said. "Until Don pays off everybody he owes, startin with me, money is all the frakk we care about."

"So what is it you like so much about me, Don?" Kia said. "Is it my sexy trust fund? My gorgeous net worth? You'll get your money when we reach the base. I hope it'll all fit up your ass." She turned to Jakk. "Some friend you got there. Good thing you're poor."

She stormed out.

"Dirt poor!" Jakk called after her. "Sand poor!"

"What's she so mad at me for?" Don complained to Komba. "You're the one who told her money is all we care about."

"Yeah but you're the one got his balls cradled."

Don reflexively covered his groin.

"She knows I'm a selfish piece of shit, but she had higher hopes for you, Don. Ain't nothin nastier than a disappointed lady."

"I'm disappointed too, you know."

"Everybody's disappointed, Don. You think I couldn't use a little ball-cradling? Hell yes I could. Problem is nobody could find the frakkin things under all this hair."

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

1

At first glance the Yoma system was an unlikely location for the secret Activist base. Yomanians were known to be quiet, rule-bound and hyper-efficient. For these reasons the IP's administrative functions had been sourced to Yoma. If the Chairman's executive offices on Crystor were the brains of the IP, then Yoma might be thought of as its central nervous system.

The problem was that after so many solar cycles of controlling the daily operations of government, Yomanians had come to feel, in their own understated way, that they *were* the IP, practically speaking. That their work, and by extension they themselves, were far more important than the Board, the President...even the Chairman. Decisions affecting the entire galaxy were made on Crystor, but Yoma was where shit got done. Or didn't get done, as, increasingly, the Yomanians saw fit to determine.

They were not in revolt. They merely felt that it was both their responsibility and their right to exercise their own judgment in carrying out the everyday tasks of governance.

Over time this had created tensions, most of which remained beneath the surface. The brain and the central nervous system couldn't afford to be in open conflict. But as the Chairman and the President began sourcing the Yomanians' work to other systems, it became clear that the battle lines had been drawn.

So when Kia, who had long been the Yomanians' biggest advocate on the Board, requested use of Yoma's fourth moon for what she termed "an extended corporate retreat," no objections were raised and no questions asked.

The Terodakta touched down in the main hangar bay. As the boarding ramp lowered itself the Princess's boots could be seen at the top of the ramp. She was bouncing on the balls of her feet.

When the ramp was halfway down Kia couldn't wait any longer. She walked, and then walked faster, and then ran. When she got to the end of the ramp she jumped off. She turned back to the ship, made a very rude gesture in the direction of certain persons inside, and then walked off in a huff.

Waiting for her at the hangar entrance was General Stallid, supreme Activist military commander. Old enough to be Kia's grandfather, the general had come out of retirement to serve the cause. Which was a big help, because the only other Activist with any military experience was the Princess. Given the choice between a loyal Activist who happened to be a general and a great commander who could be persuaded to fight for the cause, Kia would have opted for the latter. She settled for General Stallid.

"Welcome, Madam Princess," the general said. "We're all happy you're safe."

"None of us will be safe for long, General," Kia said, brushing past him. "The Defense Star is on its way. We need an attack plan as soon as possible."

"Right," the general said. "Who do you think should handle that?"

Kia grimaced and kept walking. The general hurried after her.

Jakk waited until Kia left the hangar before emerging from the Terodakta. He was followed down the ramp by the androids.

They were greeted by an aide sent by Kia.

"You're Jakk, I take it. The Princess has asked me to convey that if you want to join the fighter group that's going to attack the Defense Star, you're more than welcome. If you don't want to, you can 'rot in hell with that greedy asshole Don."

"I'll be joining."

"Please proceed to the ready room. Follow those arrows, you can't miss it."

Jakk did as instructed.

"Now," the aide said, "which of you two is carrying the data?"

I am.

"Come with me to the Op Center and you can interface with our mainframe."

Lita giggled.

"What's funny?"

"To put it in human terms," Eighty-eight said, "she has the libido of a teenager."

"So you two aren't...?"

"Her and me? Oh heavens no."

"Could've fooled me," the aide said. She gestured for Lita to follow her, and off they went.

"Fooled you how?" Eighty-eight said, giving chase. "I don't get it. Wait up!"

"We are entering the Yoma system," reported an officer to the President and the Secretary.

Stobbs acknowledged and dismissed the man with a nod. Then he and Brace resumed their conversation.

"Funny," the Secretary said mirthlessly. "I wouldn't have thought a Star Knight was permitted to have children. Didn't they forswear marriage when they joined the Order?"

"That was the requirement," the President said. "But...not every Knight adhered to it."

Stobbs glanced at him.

"So I've heard," Brace said.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

1

In the ready room Jakk was outfitted with flight gear and introduced to the squad commander.

"Ordinarily Captain Yte would be your group leader," the commander explained, "but she's out of commission. Some kind of sleeping sickness. So you'll get her fighter, and Doksen here" -- he nodded at an unassuming, bespectacled young man -- "will take charge of the group. You're in good hands with Dok."

"Cool," Jakk said. "What kind of ship?"

"Usurper-class assault vessel. Single-person fighter with on-board android for troubleshooting and damage repair."

"The way I fly there won't be any damage to repair," Jakk said. Turning to Dok he added, "Just put me on point and tell everyone else to stay outta my way." This drew stares from the other pilots. "Yeah, that's right. You think I think I'm hot shit? Well you're right...and so am I. And I'm ready to deal some death and destruction!"

"Okay then," Dok said.

2

A few minutes later the pilots were summoned to a meeting room.

Jakk entered first and took a front-row center seat. His comrades noted this and scrambled to claim the seats in the back. Once all but the first two rows were filled, the remaining pilots elected to stand.

Princess Kia and General Stallid entered the room. Jakk stood up.

"At ease," the general said. "I have a deep-seated distrust of authority figures, including myself. So we don't bother with salutes and all that foofaraw."

Jakk sat down.

"We should begin the briefing, General," Kia said.

"Shall we begin, then?"

"Yes," Kia said.

"Very well. As you all know, the Defense Star is impervious to missiles. Nor can our larger warships safely penetrate the platform's shields. Our only hope, then, is to attack with small fighters and target a thermal exhaust port that the stolen data have revealed to be a weakness."

As the general spoke a schematic of the Defense Star appeared on a large screen behind him. The location of the exhaust port glowed red.

"Now I'm not here to tell you all how to do your jobs..." General Stallid went on.

"That's exactly what he's here to do," Kia told the pilots.

"But it seems to me that we'll need a sustained laser barrage over the next several hours to inflict the necessary damage."

"Another way to think of it," Kia said, "is that in less than *one* hour we'll all be captured or killed."

That set the pilots abuzz.

"So what we need is a quick strike with a photon torpedo."

"That may well work better," the general said. "You'll have to decide for yourselves."

Kia shook her head vigorously.

"The port is small and remotely located, so if you do choose torpedoes, try to land one within a 1,000-meter radius of the target if you can."

"...by which the general means that only an exact hit on the *one-meter-wide* target will do."

"Now, if you choose to accept this mission--"

"Get to your fighters," Kia said. "Go!"

3

Aboard the Defense Star, a computer voice announced: "Time to destination is...thirty minutes. Time to destination is...thirty minutes."

"Why does it put the little pauses in there?" Brace asked Stobbs.

4

The path to his fighter took Jakk by the Terodakta. At the foot of the ship's ramp he saw piles and piles of metal containers.

Jakk watched as Komba positioned himself in front of a container, bent his legs, wrapped his arms around the box and then, with tremendous effort, picked it up. Cursing and staggering, the hairy creature lugged the container up the ramp.

He passed Don coming down the ramp and paused long enough to get a little shouty with him. Don made a placating gesture and scurried the rest of the way down the ramp, where Jakk was waiting for him.

They regarded each other uneasily.

"Looks like a hell of a lot more than 17,000."

"That's because they paid us in one-Q coins. Son-of-a-bitches are heavy as hell."

"The frakk would you know?" came Komba's voice from inside the ship.

"Well I can't say I feel bad for you," Jakk said.

"Frakk you too, farm boy."

Jakk looked at Don, who wouldn't meet his gaze.

"So you're just gonna take the money and leave, huh? Pay off your debts like a-- like some kind of frakking *adult*?"

"Aw, come on, kid."

"Save your own skin by not going on a shitty mission that's probably doomed to failure? Turn your back on a violent faction threatening the galaxy with chaos?"

"Look, I get it, all right? I'm the bad guy. But my hands are tied."

"All pilots...report to your ships," a computer voice said. "All pilots...report to your ships."

"Why don't you come with us?" Don said. "You're pretty good in a fight. We could use you."

"Take the safe way out? No way, old man."

"Watch it, now."

"Just keep doing the responsible thing, all right, Don? I guess that's what you're best at."

Jakk headed off. Don watched, his expression troubled.

"Hey, Jakk," he called.

The young man turned back.

Don gestured toward his own groin. "Shapely. Her word, not mine."

5

When Jakk reached his ship he found Kia and the androids waiting for him.

"What's wrong?" the Princess asked.

"Frakking Don. I can't believe he isn't coming along. He's so mature!"

"I know. But he has his own path to follow. The path of the asshole."

"I wish Xen were here."

"Me too."

Kia reached up to hug Jakk, but he flinched and she stopped herself. She held out her hand and he shook it. Then she left.

"So where's my android?" Jakk asked Eighty-eight.

"Lita will be accompanying you."

"Lucky girl."

Not really. No other android was willing to fly with you.

"It seems that in a short time you've developed a bit of a reputation."

"Whatever. Let's go, Brownie."

Jakk mounted the fighter and climbed into the cockpit. Before Lita could do the same, Eighty-eight stopped her.

"Don't go getting yourself killed now, honey."

With him as the pilot, the probability of my death is 99.8357%.

"I don't care, you *have* to survive. We may be incompatible in every possible way, but you're the only one who really gets me."

I don't get you at all.

"Oh, you and your logic. Come here." He held out his arms.

That's a human gesture.

"Shut up and hug me, bitch."

6

With the ship loaded and ready, Jakk waited for his turn to take off.

Out of nowhere he heard Xen's voice: "Jakk."

He looked around, bewildered. "Xen?"

"Listen, Jakk. You have the Power."

"Where are you, Xen?"

"Trust your instincts."

"What if they're bad instincts, which is kind of what I'm used to?"

"Don't argue with the dead, Jakk. It's bad form."

"What happened to you, Xen?"

"Xen?"

Observing all this, Lita commented: He appears to be schizophrenic. Revised probability of my death: 100 percent.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

1

The assault force, 16 fighters in all, emerged from a series of hangar bays and assembled in the skies above the moon like a swarm of drunken bees.

Though all ships were Usurper-class no two of them looked quite the same. Princess Kia's trust fund kept Activism's doors open, so to speak, but it couldn't cover all costs. Some of the fighters had been bought at auction; the remainder had been cobbled together from spare parts picked up at junk depositories around the galaxy.

The pilots ranged in age from 18 to 23, with one exception (more on him later). Among them only the incapacitated Captain Yte had any actual experience flying a Usurper. A few, like Jakk, had flown skimmers or other craft of that nature. The rest had done reasonably well on simulators.

The majority of the trained, experienced pilots had been captured or killed. The remainder were simply off duty. No Activist was permitted to work more than 30 hours per week. Union rules.

2

Back at the base, Kia and General Stallid stationed themselves in the war room, where multiple displays monitored every aspect of the coming conflict. Eighty-eight was there as well, hovering behind the Princess.

One of the displays showed a counter ticking down the time until the Defense Star reached the moon. To avoid discrimination against the differently sighted, there were also regular announcements of the time by a computer voice.

And to accommodate those who were both visually and aurally exceptional, there was a tactile communication system using raised symbols.

The computer voice said, "The Defense Star will arrive in...15 minutes. The Defense Star will arrive in...15 minutes."

"If we survive this," Kia commented, "I'm getting rid of that pause."

3

The assault force was comprised of two groups of eight fighters each. As the Defense Star came within visual range Doksen, the newly promoted group leader, spoke into his mic.

"Black Group this is Black Leader. We are about to commence our final approach to the target. Please check in."

"Black Four -- achoo! -- standing by." Black Four was mildly allergic to the microfiber material from which flight uniforms were made. The shop steward had filed a grievance on Black Four's behalf. The Princess had denied the grievance on the grounds that Black Four's services were needed in the attack on the Defense Star. The union was appealing. It had contacted the IP to request a delay in hostilities until the grievance could be adjudicated. The IP had yet to respond.

4

"Black Seven standing by," came a whispery voice over the comm system.

"Speak up, Black Seven," Dok ordered.

"Standing by," said Black Seven, at a level perhaps one-third of a decibel higher.

Black Seven suffered from Reticent Personality Disorder. She was committed to overcoming her affliction through a program of therapy and medication. She'd made some progress over the past 18 solar cycles. People no longer thought she was mute.

5

"Black Five standing by," Jakk reported. "Still waiting for you to put me on point so I can lead the attack."

"Hello?" Jakk said.

6

"Black Six standing by!" said a cheery voice.

"What a great day to be alive. Engines operating at peak efficiency, weapons armed, all systems online and ready to go! Our cause is just, our hearts are pure, and I'm telling you, friends, through the power of collective action justice *will be served*. Whooo!"

Everybody hated Black Six.

7

"Black Two standing the frakk by." Black Two couldn't be sure anyone had heard him and at any rate he didn't care. He didn't like the new comm system. What was wrong with the old system? The old system had one button that you pushed when you wanted to talk. The new system had a touch screen with all these colorful squares on it that you could tap to access all kinds of features. And Black Two could never be sure when the mic was on and when it wasn't.

Why were things always changing, dammit? If something worked there was no need to replace it with something else just because the new thing was better, faster, cooler, whatever. Why did everything these days have to be such a pain in the ass?

Black Two was 49 solar cycles old.

8

Another voice on the comm: "Black, uh...which one am I again? Nine?"

"There is no Black Nine, Black Eight," Black Leader replied wearily.

"Right. So, Black Eight standing on. Standing pat. Standstill."

"Read you loud and clear, Black Eight."

9

Only one pilot hadn't been heard from.

"Black Three, you out there? Please check in."

"Black Three?"

"He's probably asleep again," Black Two grouched.

10

It was true. Black Three was out and the on-board android was flying the ship. Black Three suffered from Situationally Triggered Narcolepsy.

Unlike other narcoleptics Black Three's sudden lapses into sleep were not random. They only occurred when Black Three encountered racism, sexism, bigotry or any other form of social injustice, whether directed at him or at someone else.

The worst part about Black Three's condition was that when people made fun of his STN they triggered an episode of it, so he never even got to respond to them with the impassioned plea for tolerance he'd been rehearsing in his head.

The reason Black Three fell asleep was that he was having a bit of a pre-battle snack and he dropped his sucrose stick. It landed on the floor of the cockpit, near his right boot. Black Three strained against his flight harness to reach the stick but he couldn't get to it.

Straining against his harness made Black Three ultra-conscious of the excess of adipose tissue on his torso. Awareness of his pudgy breasts and ample belly reminded Black Three of all the times people had referred to him as fat, and that triggered a narcoleptic episode.

People weren't supposed to say "fat." The fair term was "metabolically outlying."

When Black Leader mentioned him by name over the comm system one of Black Three's eyelids twitched and he made a sound like "Skrnx?" But he didn't wake up.

11

"Never mind, then," Black Leader said. " Lock weapons into position and assume attack formation. We are going in. Repeat, we are going in."

"Yeeee haaaa!" Black Six cried.

"Jeez," Jakk said. "What a dick, right?"

"Can anyone hear me?" Jakk said.

"We hear you, asshole," said Black Two. "We just don't like you."

"Well thanks for explaining, I guess."

"Shit. He wasn't supposed to hear that."

"Still hearing you," Jakk said.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

1

The fighter groups split off and reduced power. Before them, growing more immense each second, was the Defense Star.

"Expect some turbulence as we breach the shield," Black Leader told his group. "Set front deflectors to full."

His directive was replied to with a chorus of "Roger that"s.

"And for those of you who worship a Higher Force of whatever sort...now would be the time to admit that religions are tools of the oppressors, that morality is a construct of the immoral, and that life after death is a fairy tale propagated by sadists."

2

The Defense Star's shield couldn't harm small ships traveling at low speeds. The Usurpers passed through it easily.

Black Three woke up to find his entire view filled by the platform. "Holy shit!" he said, sitting up straight and opening his eyes wide. "Look at the size of that thing!"

Then he realized he was being judgmental, and this triggered his narcoleptic response, and back out he went.

3

"Expect enemy fire to begin shortly," Dok warned his group. "Increase speed and prepare for evasive maneuvers."

A glance at his tactical display showed that Brown Group was coming up fast on the left.

Brown Leader's voice came over the comm system. "Black Leader this is Brown Leader. We are proceeding to the target. Cover us."

Black Leader muted his mic. "No, Brown, we figured we'd just hang out up here while you did all the work." He turned the mic on and forced a big smile onto his face. "Acknowledged, Brown Leader. We'll go in low and try to draw their fire. Good luck!"

"Very tactful of you, Dok," Black Two said. "I hate that bitch too."

And then: "Please tell me I didn't just do it again."

"You did it again," Brown Leader said.

4

The Usurpers of Black Group peeled off one by one and began their descent.

Aboard the Defense Star the sounds of klaxons filled the corridors as personnel rushed to their battle stations.

On the surface of the platform, as the fighters approached, dozens upon dozens of laser cannons swiveled into position and opened fire.

In the war room, Kia gripped one hand tightly with the other as the attack commenced.

In seconds the space above the Defense Star was a chaotic scene of spinning, looping, twisting, diving fighters and a storm of laser bolts trying to destroy them.

5

"Okay, bitches," Jakk said. "Here we go. Hero time. Watch how it's done!"

"What an idiot," said Black Eight. He unclipped his harness and stretched his arms. He took off his helmet and ran his hands through his hair. He felt a lot more comfortable now.

"Gonna get himself killed, you wait and see." He grabbed the nav sticks and executed his peel. Spotting a cluster of cannons, he zoomed off in their direction.

6

Jakk forced his fighter into a precariously steep dive. The surface of the Defense Star rushed up at him at tremendous speed.

He felt as if a giant hand was trying to push him straight through the seat. Cannons bracketed his ship with laser fire.

The disturbance interrupted Lita, who'd been interfacing with the fighter's operating system, which called itself Violet.

Why isn't he firing his guns? Lita said.

I'm not sure he knows what he's doing, Violet replied.

They briefly debated taking control of the ship. In the end they decided against, because their programming required them to delay any action that conflicted with human agency. If androids and operating systems overrode humans every time humans appeared to be acting irrationally, humans would never get to do anything.

Jakk couldn't hear the debate and he wouldn't have paid it any mind. He waited as long as he dared and then he jabbed the twin fire buttons repeatedly. A torrent of laser bolts shot from his cannons, tearing huge gashes in the platform's surface.

"EAT HOT DEATH, FREEDOM LOVERS!"

The impact of his barrage cut a swath of destruction, kicking up enormous amounts of debris.

"YAAAAAAHHHHHH!"

Large chunks of metal and carbon fiber erupted from the surface.

And Jakk's fighter was headed straight for them.

"Pull up, Black Five, pull up!" cried Black Leader.

"YAAAAAAHHHHHHH!" Jakk repeated, in a different key.

I enjoyed knowing you, Lita told Violet.

7

Jakk yanked on the nav sticks with every gram of strength he had. Now that he was acting rationally Lita and Violet were free to assist.

The nose of the fighter laboriously lifted itself and the ship began climbing out of the dive. Jakk dodged what rubble he could and blasted what rubble he couldn't. With his muscles straining and his teeth clenched he guided the Usurper out of the fray.

"Whew!" he said, finally able to relax.

Black Leader's ship came up on Jakk's left wing. "You all right?" Dok asked. "Things got a little hairy there."

Jakk's spine stiffened. "It was nothing. See what I did down there? That shit was frakking fierce!"

"How about covering me while I make a run?"

"I'll do you one better, Black Leader, cause I'm ready for round two."

Before he finished speaking Jakk powered up and broke hard left.

It was a nifty maneuver; he executed it like an old pro. It would have been a thing of beauty, except for the fact that Black Leader's ship was in the way.

"Oh shit!" Jakk said.

"What the--!" Dok said.

Jakk's Usurper clipped Black Leader's ship across the nose. Dok lost control and entered a spin. He spun right into a random laser bolt that beheaded his android and destroyed his controls. Dok's fighter plummeted toward the Defense Star like a missile.

"Dok!" Jakk cried.

"Dammit to hell," Dok said. "The idiot got me k--"

Before he could finish, his ship plunged into the platform.

8

Communications Specialist Hix was having a bad day.

Staff shortages in his division had forced him to curtail a vacation and report to the Defense Star ahead of schedule. No sooner had he arrived than he became embroiled in a dispute between Commanders Epp and Urit over the wording of the network notice announcing deployment of the new platform.

Hix got saddled with reconciling the commanders' diametrically opposed positions, and not only did he not succeed, but Epp and Urit teamed up to hate on Hix.

Later in the day Hix learned that his ex-girlfriend was engaged, which left him reeling. He was consumed by remorse over their breakup and plagued by the idea that soon she would be lost forever to him.

This, naturally, put a damper on his breacktime holocall with his current girlfriend. Throughout the call Hix was combative and short-tempered, and things ended badly when he learned he was Vonna's 38th boyfriend. Hix didn't know what was worse: that she'd had so many lovers or that he'd had just two.

And then, of course, the Defense Star came under attack. Which shouldn't have mattered so much to Hix, since he was safely ensconced in an auxiliary comm tower that would have been way, way down on any smart assailant's list of priority targets. But which instead turned out to be the rotten cherry on top of the sour cake that was this day. For when Black Leader's fighter crashed into the Defense Star, it pierced the tower and broke into several pieces, and one of those pieces fell on Hix.

Pinned to the floor and trapped under thousands of kilograms of wreckage, he surveyed the destruction all around him and reflected on the chain of events that had led him to this moment. There was nothing funny about any of this, and yet there was a grim smile on his face when he said, with his final breath:

"I'm not even supposed to be here today!"

9

"What the frakk just happened?" said Black Two over the comm system. "Black Leader, who just crashed?"

"Black Leader, come in, please."

"I think," Jakk said carefully, "it might have been Dok who went down, Black Two."

"What'd you see, Black Five?"

"Something happen to Dok?" asked Black Six.

"Which one is he again?" said Black Eight.

Black Four sneezed into his mic.

If Black Seven said anything, nobody heard her.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

1

"This can't be their entire force," the President said. "Sixteen fighters?"

"Fifteen now," replied the Secretary, as footage from surface cams showed the demise of Black Leader.

"They must be holding something in reserve. A second wave."

On one screen a fighter from Brown Group, its guns blazing, flew directly at the cam through which it was being viewed. The image of the ship swelled until it almost filled the display, and the twin tracks of its laser bolts advanced steadily until the cam was destroyed and the screen went black.

"I don't know what they'd be waiting for. We'll reach the base before they can execute another attack."

Brace scanned the multitude of displays on the bridge, seeking method in the Activists' madness.

"And the exhaust port they've targeted: How much risk does their strategy pose?"

"Minimal."

"Some, in other words."

"An infinitesimal amount, I assure you."

"We aren't having much success with our cannons," Brace said.

"The guns were installed with larger targets in mind."

The computer voice announced, "Time to destination is...ten minutes. Time to--"

"I'm taking a squadron out there," Brace said. "We can't leave anything to chance."

"You will do as you wish," Stobbs said. "But please be careful, Mister President. We wouldn't want to lose you on the verge of our greatest triumph."

"Don't worry, Stobbs. I won't spoil your celebration."

2

The thermal exhaust port was located at the terminus of a long, narrow trench that bristled with guns. The only way to attack the port was to navigate the hazards of the trench.

The approach to the trench was heavily defended as well, as the fighters of Brown Group had discovered. Brown Three made the first attempt to enter the trench and her Usurper took so much damage that she had to pull up. After that Brown Leader ordered her squad mates to focus on destroying the first-level defenses to clear a path to the trench.

She made the first run herself, and was able to knock out a pair of turrets. It was an impressive bit of flying and shooting, even more so when you considered that Brown Leader was distracted the whole time.

She'd gone over it and over it, wracking her brain for the missing puzzle piece, the solution of the mystery, the answer to the question. And yet: nothing. She had no idea why Black Two thought she was a bitch. She couldn't even recall ever talking to the guy.

3

And there lay the problem, Black Two thought. In all the time he and Brown Leader had been comrades, not once had she spoken to him. Not once! He might as well have been invisible to her.

So what if he was old enough to be her father? She couldn't say hi? Couldn't engage in a little harmless workplace banter? Couldn't recognize that he loved her with all his heart, that he wanted to take her away from all this, whisk her off to somewhere far away, where no one cared about Activism or the IP? Where they could make a life together on a humble farm and raise a passel of tow-headed children?

"Black Two this is Black Six, do you copy?"

"Black Two, are you there?"

Black Two's heavy sigh was caught by the mic. "What do you want, Six."

"Thinking we should try a tandem run, see if we can light the joint up. You game?"

"Well it's not like I have anything better to do."

"That's the spirit! Sort of."

They paired off and prepared to dive.

"You ever been in love, Six?"

"Kind of a weird question but yes, I have been and I still am. Been three solar cycles for Fendla and me."

"Yeah, me neither. Let's go kill."

Black Two's fighter dipped and headed for the surface, with Black Six right behind. Two eased up until Six was even with him, and then they combined to unleash hell on the enemy. First they opened a gash more than 100 meters long, and then, on a second pass, Black Six dug the hole deeper with his lasers, setting the stage for Black Two to launch a pair of photon torpedoes into the gaping wound. There were two brilliant bursts of light and then a small section of the Defense Star caved in.

"Wooooo-hooooo!" Black Six cried. "That was AWESOME."

"Damn straight!" Black Two shouted. "Who cares if I'll never have sex! I can do THAT. Yes!! Let's go again!"

"Ah," Brown Leader said to herself, in response to Black Two's outburst. Suddenly it all made sense. She was now very glad she hadn't ever talked to the guy.

"Hey," said Brown Three over the comm system, "they've stopped shooting."

Seconds ago the space above the Defense Star had been alive with thousands of laser bolts and the 15 fighters trying to avoid them. Now only the ships remained.

"This is great!" Black Eight said. "They're giving up!"

In the war room, an alert sounded. On the tactical display the blue blips representing Activist ships were no longer alone. Now there were red blips heading straight for them.

Still gripping her hands with white-knuckle intensity, Kia spoke into her mic. "All fighters, red alert. Eight enemy ships approaching fast."

As the red blips sped toward the blue ones, the Princess started banging her hands on her hip.

"Someone is stressed," Eighty-eight said.

"Everyone stay sharp," said Brown Leader. "Those Liberators are nasty little buggers and--"

She'd been about to add that the enemy ships' cannons had greater range than those of the Usurpers. But then her ship was struck by a pair of bolts and obliterated.

"Great shooting, White Leader!" said White Seven. "You fragged their ass!"

"This isn't a game we're playing, pilot," the President said.

"Understood, sir. My apologies."

In quick succession four more Activist fighters were destroyed. The remaining 10 scrambled to avoid enemy fire. The Liberators closed in on them and thus commenced a massive dogfight over the Defense Star.

Black Three woke up in the middle of it. Ships zoomed past him in seemingly every direction. Laser bolts exploded all around.

He quickly grasped that if not for the efforts of his android he'd be dead by now. The realization settled in the pit of his stomach like a bad meal.

Such privilege had he enjoyed! Lying there unconscious while the servant class did all the hard work. What made him any better than them? How could he justify such blatant exploitation?

His eyelids fluttered and he felt himself slipping off again.

"No!" he said, slapping himself awake.

That slap stung like hell, but it felt kind of good too. Restorative. Redemptive, even.

He hit himself again, harder. And then a third time, leaving a bright red imprint on his cheek.

"Yeah!" he exulted. "THAT'S what I'm talkin about! Enough of this guilt shit!"

He grabbed his nav sticks. He set his sights on the nearest Liberator and took off after it.

He never saw the one that blew him to pieces.

10

It was White Seven. After getting dressed down by the President he had something to prove, and by the Whibmask he was going to do it.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

1

He was the best pilot I've ever seen, Xen had said about his former student, and most of those who witnessed Brace's exploits in the dogfight would have agreed. The President's specially modified Liberator, the one with the distinctive bent-wing profile, could go faster, turn tighter and shoot further than any other ship engaged in the hostilities. After taking out Brown Leader Brace quickly downed two more members of her group.

These kills, along with the three achieved by other IP pilots, meant that before the battle was four minutes old the Activists were down to nine fighters. One of which, Brown Three, no longer had use of its weapons.

The attackers had lost their numerical advantage and time was running short. They needed new leadership and a new strategy. They needed a hero to come forth at this, their most desperate hour.

Brown Three had been circling high above the fray, which lent her a unique perspective on things.

"Listen up," she told the remnants of the assault force. "If we stay on the defensive we're all gonna be dead very soon. It's time we take the fight straight to them.

"While Black Group occupies those Liberators with a head-on assault Brown Four and Brown Eight will make a run at the target. I'll join Brown Group in the trench to run interference. There's no time to waste so move it, people."

Acknowledgments echoed over the comm system. Black Group reorganized itself on the fly and prepared to attack.

Brown Group brought up the rear, waiting for the right moment to peel off toward the trench.

"This is our big chance," Brown Three said. "Make it happen."

2

"Who put her in charge?" Jakk griped, as the battle began.

She did, Lita said. Why could humans not grok the obvious?

Jakk singled out a Liberator and flew right at it with cannons blasting. The enemy took a glancing blow and darted away, with Jakk in close pursuit.

"She did, didn't she? Well isn't that convenient. Why no discussion? Why couldn't we vote on it? She doesn't even have any guns, dammit! And I'm the best pilot out here!"

Based on observational data the enemy leader appears to be the best pilot out here.

Jakk chased the Liberator everywhere, matching its every move. But he couldn't land a kill shot.

"That ship of his gives him an unfair advantage. See what he could do flying this piece of ship. Shit."

He's destroyed three of our fighters.

Jakk noticed another Usurper under heavy fire from an enemy ship. Disaster seemed imminent. He abandoned his pursuit of the Liberator he'd nicked and went to the aid of his comrade.

"Big frakking deal."

You've only destroyed one of our fighters.

Jakk's face went red. His expression hardened and with grim determination he went to work.

Recognizing the imperiled Usurper as Black Seven, he barked at her over the comm system. "Black Seven, I'm gonna save your ass. Bank at two-one-zero."

"Acknowledged," said Black Seven.

"Acknowledge, Black Seven."

"I heard you!"

"Will you speak the hell UP?!"

Black Seven couldn't do it. She'd forgotten her medication and she was even shyer than usual at the moment.

But she wasn't stupid, and she didn't want to die. She banked as ordered, and when Jakk saw this he made his move. He swung around until he was headed straight for Black Seven, and then he throttled up to top speed.

"On my mark, Black Seven, you get the hell out of my way."

"Right."

"Still can't hear you but frakk it, here we go."

The two Activist ships raced toward each other, with the pursuing Liberator gaining steadily on Black Seven.

"Get ready..." Jakk said. "And...NOW!"

Black Seven broke left and Jakk filled the space where she had been with cannon fire.

The Liberator never saw it coming. The enemy ship exploded spectacularly and Jakk's fighter zoomed through the wreckage.

"YES!" he cried. "How'd you like that?!" he asked Lita.

Nice work.

"Great frakking work is what that was! *Now* who's the best pilot?"

A laser bolt burst dangerously close by and the ship was rocked. Another Liberator had set its sights on Jakk and was approaching fast.

He cursed and spun and dove. The enemy followed him down. Jakk zigged when he should have zagged and took a hit. He scanned the readouts for a damage assessment. "Little help, anyone?" he called out.

"Hang in there, Black Five," he heard Black Two say. "I'm coming in at zero-nine-three. Still think you're an asshole but I'm gonna save you anyway."

Jakk adjusted his course and led his attacker into the path of Black Two's cannons. The Liberator was destroyed and Jakk breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thanks," he told Black Two with great reluctance.

"Your ship all right?"

"Nothing serious. The android'll take care of it."

Black Two headed off.

"How's it look back there, Lita?" Jakk asked.

"Lita?"

Lita was unable to answer. Her speakers were gone, along with almost half of her face.

She hoped this wouldn't affect her relationship with Violet.

While the battle raged Brown Four and Brown Eight slipped away and headed for the trench. Brown Three joined them and covered their rear.

Getting into the trench was relatively easy, as most of the guns guarding it had been knocked out. But the floor and walls of the corridor remained heavily defended, and the Usurpers flew into a storm of laser bolts. The fighters increased speed and weaved erratically to avoid fire.

"I'll watch for Liberators," Brown Three said. "One of you clear a path while the other sights the target."

"I'll take the point, Four," said Brown Eight. "Get your torpedoes ready and follow me in."

"Roger that, Eight. But actually, I was kind of hoping to be on point? 'Cause that's such a, like, andro thing, to be the aggressive one and take the lead. And I thought it might be cool if we subverted those toxic gender roles for a change? I don't know."

"No, I get it, Four. But here's my thing: Haven't we progressed to the stage where that kind of forced role-reversal, which used to be a big 'Eff you' to the patriarchal hegemony, is now like basically not subversive at all since it's built on the presumption that men continue to be selfish, power-hungry jerks and women continue to be noble, helpless victims?"

"Actually that's a really interesting idea..."

5

"WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THIS SHIT!" Kia yelled into her mic. "Brown Eight, take the point. Brown Four, sight the target and prepare to launch torpedoes."

"Wow, so, very traditional," Brown Four said. "To hell with sisterhood, I guess."

"I know, right?" added Brown Eight. "I mean, even recognizing how this protects my own privilege, I have to say--"

"GET THE FRAKK TO IT!!"

"Complying," the pilots replied unhappily.

"The Defense Star will arrive in...five minutes. The D--"

"The tension is killing me," Kia said, slumping over.

Seeing an opportunity to be of service, Eighty-eight put his hands on the Princess's shoulders and began kneading the knotted muscles there. Kia flinched at his touch but then she relaxed a little. The android kept working on her.

"I don't know," General Stallid said, eyeing them apprehensively. "This seems inappropriate for the workplace."

"It's fine," Kia said, "he's gay."

"Oh, good. Can I be next?"

6

Brown Eight led Brown Four down the trench, blasting as many gun emplacements as he could. Four turned on her targeting system and initiated the torpedo-arming sequence. Brown Three followed at a distance, ever watchful.

"Target acquired," Brown Four said.

"Steady now," said Brown Three. "You won't be in range for another minute."

"They've stopped shooting," Brown Eight reported.

"Incoming fighter!" Brown Three cried. "Divert power to rear deflectors."

The President's Liberator dipped into the trench.

"Faster!" Brown Three said. "Everything you've got!"

The Liberator opened fire, streaming laser bolts at its quarry.

The two lead ships darted from side to side in random, jagged sequences. Brown Three matched Brown Four's every move, shielding Four from the enemy.

Brace recognized this and concentrated his fire on Brown Eight.

"Not much room to maneuver," Eight said, as his ship was buffeted by explosions.

"He's in trouble," Brown Four said. "We have to help!"

But it was too late for that. The Liberator scored a direct hit. Brown Eight's fighter spun out of control and crashed into the trench wall.

"Dammit!" said Brown Four. "I liked Eight. He was okay for a dude."

The President's ship now turned its guns on Brown Three, which continued to protect the ship in front of it.

"This is stupid, Three," Four said. "We're too slow and completely defenseless."

"Stay on target."

"You'll be gone in a second and then I'm next."

"Stay on target."

"I'll never get there in time!"

"Stay on t--"

"STOP SAYING 'STAY ON TARGET'!"

The enemy found its mark and Brown Three's ship was destroyed.

"All right, to hell with this," Brown Four said. Knowing she'd be dead in a second if she didn't do something drastic, she cut all power to her engines and watched the Liberator zoom by.

"How do you like that, huh?"

Brown Four powered up and gave chase. She trained her cannons on the President's fighter.

"How's it feel now, asshole?"

Before she could fire, though, Brace pulled the same stunt Brown Four had just pulled. She flew past him and he opened fire immediately. Her ship disintegrated in a shower of parts and sparks.

"Shit!" Kia said. "We're down to six ships and the Defense Star will be here any minute. What are we gonna do?"

Eighty-eight was now massaging her neck and the base of her skull.

"Would you like me to stop?" he asked.

"Are you kidding? Go faster. Faster and more intense!"

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

1

"This is terrible," said Black Four, between sneezes.

"There's nothing we can do," replied the voice on the comm system.

"There has to be!"

"We're out of time, my friend."

"Dammit, dammit, DAMMIT," said Black Four, and then he sneezed three more times, not to put too fine a point on it.

The voice belonged to the shop steward, who'd just informed Black Four that not only would the IP not agree to halt the fighting so that Black Four's grievance could be heard, but also that the only possibility left was to submit the matter to binding arbitration. That would take months, possibly even longer.

"And how long do we have?" Black Four had asked the steward.

"How long until we have to file for arbitration?"

"How long do we have left to *live* if the battle continues?"

"Uh, four minutes? Unless we win?"

"Fine, then," Black Four said. "It's time to end this shitting war."

"What do you mean?" asked the steward, but Black Four terminated the transmission.

Before another round of sneezes could come on the pilot took off one of his gloves, tore two strips off of it, and plugged his nostrils with the fabric. Then he got on the comm system.

"Okay, listen up, whoever's left out there. I'm gonna kill everything in sight, so stay the hell out of my way. And while I'm doing that somebody blow up the goddamned Defense Star for me, will ya? I got shit to do."

He turned off his mic and armed his photon torpedoes.

Using torpedoes in a dogfight was kind of like shooting fish in a barrel, except with a much higher success rate. By the time you were done there would be no fish, no barrel and, if you weren't careful, no you. But Black Four didn't have time to worry about that.

His first torpedo missed the nearest Liberator by 300 meters. It was still close enough, however, to trigger the proximity detonator. The torpedo exploded and the ensuing shockwave pushed the nearest IP fighter into the next-nearest one, destroying them both.

Two down, five to go.

"Binding arbitration my *ass*," Black Four said. Then the shockwave hit and he fought for control of his ship.

2

"All right, you heard Four," Black Two said to the rest of the group. "Who's ready for a run?"

Jakk didn't respond. He was being chased by White Seven.

Black Eight tried to respond but he pressed the wrong button and came very close to ejecting himself from the cockpit.

"Let's do it!" said Black Six.

"I'M READY!!!" shouted Black Seven, at the top of her tiny voice.

"Good deal, Six," said Black Two. "Anyone else?"

"I'M READY!!!!" Black Seven cried again.

"What this frakking static I keep hearing?" Black Two said.

Excuse me, Black Two's on-board android said. Black Seven's android tells me that her ship will join the attack.

"So her comm's down?"

Let's go with that.

"Well how the hell are we supposed to coord--"

Black Seven's ship zoomed by, headed straight for the trench.
"Never mind." Black Two took off, and Black Six followed suit.

3

On the bridge, Stobbs was approached by Commander Epp.

"Given the chance -- the very slight but still, very real chance -- that the Activists' plan works, Mister Secretary, would you like me to prepare an escape vehicle?"

Stobbs looked at her in disbelief.

"Just in case?" Epp said. "You'd have the peace of mind of knowing the EV was ready for us. You."

"Very well, Commander. You have my permission."

"Oh thank--! I mean, yes, sir. Right away, sir." Epp hurried off.

The Secretary wondered how long it would take her to realize there were no escape vehicles. And then, just to humor himself, he calculated how much had been saved by omitting the EVs.

It was quite a nice number. He'd invested it all in Cereniti Ventures.

4

While Black Four terrorized enemy fighters with his reckless use of torpedoes, and while Jakk dueled with White Seven, the attack force entered the trench and sped toward the exhaust port.

"I have a really good feeling about this," Black Six said.

"Don't jinx us, asshole," replied Black Two.

Laser cannons fired steadily at the intruders. The Usurpers dodged and weaved.

Black Seven turned on her targeting system. In 35 seconds she'd be in range.

All at once the cannons ceased firing. "Heads up," said Black Two. "Here come those pissface IP motherfrakkers."

Three Liberators approached quickly, with the President leading the way.

5

Eighty-eight was a more-than-capable masseur, but the Princess's stress levels rapidly outstripped the android's ability to relax her.

When Black Two 's group came under attack from Liberators, Kia broke off the massage and looked for something to punch.

The war room was full of punchable things. Unfortunately all of them were a) likely to break Kia's fists, and b) currently performing duties absolutely vital to the war effort.

So she punched General Stallid in the arm.

"Ow!" he said. He rubbed the sore area. "Listen, I can appreciate what you were trying to do there, Your Highness. I get the whole 'Don't trust anyone in power' thing. I'm an easy target, right? Mister Big Shot General Guy."

Kia wound up again. The General raised his hands to protect himself.

"ButIhavetoquestionwhetherthisisthebestwaytoexpressthatidea!"

Kia stopped herself.

"I mean I'm no expert but..."

The Princess turned away from him and punched Eighty-eight. It hurt her a lot more than it affected him.

Physically, at least.

"What the hell was that for?" the android exclaimed.

6

"I don't know how long we can hold them off, Seven," Black Two said, as he and Black Six came under heavy fire.

("Twenty seconds," Black Seven announced, knowing no one could hear her. She armed her torpedoes.)

"Positive thoughts," Black Six said. "We can do this!"

"Just shut the frakk up, will you?"

"Why don't *you* shut... Shut the... Why don't you just BE QUIET? I don't like your attitude!"

("Fifteen seconds." The digital representation of the target grew larger and larger. A virtual crosshairs divided it into quadrants.)

"I don't give a FRAKK what you think of my attitude!" Black Two said.

"Why do you have to swear so much? Most people grow out of that."

Black Two's ship was struck by laser bolts and it crashed and exploded on the trench floor.

"Holy fart," Black Six said.

7

"Come on come on come on COME ON!" Kia said, hammering on Eighty-eight's chassis and, finally, knocking him off his feet.

"GOD DAMMIT, WOMAN! This is too much! If I wanted to be abused I'd have flown with Jakk. What *is it* with you two?"

That gave Kia a strange feeling. She calmed down long enough to help the android to his feet.

8

(Black Seven put her finger on the torpedo trigger. "Almost there.")

"Positive thoughts," Black Six said, as he tried to shield Black Seven from the enemy. "Positive thoughts, positive thoughts."

("Five seconds.")

"Positive th--"

Laser bolts. Explosion. No more positive thoughts.

"Now or never," Black Seven said, seeing that her escorts were gone. The crosshairs filled the target. She squeezed the trigger twice and entered a steep climb, pursued by the Liberators.

9

The first torpedo went wide. It smashed into the Defense Star and caused tremendous damage, but to no great end.

"Great shot, Seven!" shouted Black Eight.

10

The second torpedo missed by a meter and it failed to detonate.

"Damn," Black Seven said, and in the next instant she was caught in a crossfire. Her ship disintegrated and now there were only three Usurpers left to battle five Liberators.

And time was running out.

11

"Too late to call for a truce?" Kia asked grimly.

"Perhaps after the fighting stops," General Stallid suggested.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

1

"Holy shit," Jakk said, as the direness of his circumstances sunk in. "This suicide mission might actually get me killed."

Lita conveyed a message to Violet, who conveyed it to Jakk via scrolling text on his main display.

Good of you to recognize the danger. Demonstrates a capacity for sustained rational thought previously undetected.

"What?" Jakk said. But the text-crawl didn't stop. Bright yellow words marched up the black screen.

However, current circumstances REQUIRE the irrational bravado and reckless regard for consequences that have characterized most of your statements and actions to date.

"What's all that mean?" Jakk complained. He broke hard right to avoid getting blasted. "I ain't got time to read!"

The next block of text appeared in larger, bolder letters.

"GO FRAKK SHIT UP."

"That's all you had to say."

He swooped around and led his pursuer toward Black Four. He turned on his mic.

"Black Four, keep doing what you're doing. I'm bringing one your way."

"Roger that."

"Try not to kill me."

"Roger that too."

"Black Eight, we're gonna make a run and we're gonna do it at top speed. You ready?"

"A run at what, Black Five?"

"Just follow me when it's time!"

Jakk led his pursuer into Black Four's line of fire. Four launched a torpedo. Jakk waited as long as he dared and then he dove. White Seven followed him.

The torpedo exploded, catching two other Liberators in its shock wave and wiping them out.

Jakk survived the wave. White Seven did also, but his ship was thrown off its pursuit.

Jakk's ship paired up with Black Eight and together they headed into the trench.

2

There were only three Liberators left now. White Leader and White Seven took off after the Usurpers entering the trench. White Two gave chase to Black Four.

The Defense Star would reach the moon in one minute.

3

The Princess's attention was riveted to the displays showing the progress of the battle. She tugged at her hair with her left hand while Eighty-eight ministered to the cuts on her right.

"No I'm fine, thanks," the android said.

4

Jakk's fighter tore through the narrow corridor, with Black Eight close behind.

The enemy cannons stopped firing almost as soon as they had begun.

"Watch your back, Eight," Jakk warned.

The President and White Seven fell into pursuit of the Activists. The Liberators trained their guns on Black Eight. His ship was rocked by laser bolts.

Black Eight hadn't bothered getting back into his harness, and he still wasn't wearing his helmet. He was tossed around the cockpit like a rag doll. "What's happening?" he cried. "This isn't fair!"

"Thirty seconds, Eight! That's all I need. You have to hold on!"

"THIRTY SECONDS?! I can't even hold my breath that long!"

"Twenty-eight now! I'm almost in range!"

"Wait! I have an idea!"

Black Eight yanked on his nav sticks and climbed steeply out of the trench. He zipped away from the Defense Star at top speed.

"WHAT THE FRAKK BLACK EIGHT!" Jakk said.

"No, it's all right! I'm leading them away from you! Don't you see? They'll follow me out of the trench and..."

Black Eight checked his instruments.

"...that'll leave you free to focus on..."

Neither enemy ship was following him.

"Aw, c'mon," said Black Eight. "This is bullsh--"

He hadn't been paying attention and he almost flew into Black Four. The latter ship spun frantically to avoid a collision and was rammed by its pursuer, White Two. The ships became entangled and they spun out of control, tumbling end over end until they crashed into the Defense Star.

"Oh great," complained Black Eight. "Probably get blamed for that too."

"No!" Kia cried when Black Eight left the trench. Her right hand remained in Eighty-eight's care; the left one she banged against her thigh.

"I know someone who can help you with that," General Stallid said. She looked at him, perplexed. He glanced at her free hand. Kia looked down and saw that it now held a rather large chunk of her hair. General Stallid smiled sympathetically. She threw the hair at him and returned her attention to the battle.

6

"Now," White Seven told himself, once Black Eight was gone. "Now I'll show you, Mister President."

He was still smarting from Brace's earlier reprimand:

This isn't a game we're playing, pilot.

The words kept echoing in his mind. And that tone, the condescension in it.

What did the President know about him? Nothing, really. But on the basis of one comment White Seven had been written off as some kind of thrill-seeker.

These thoughts raced through White Seven's mind while he watched his targeting display, waiting for his chance to destroy the last threat to the exhaust port.

The display was state of the art. Its interface had been tested and refined over time, using input from combat veterans. Everything was color coded. There was no text to read and there were no numbers to process. Simple graphics bunched in the corners told White Seven everything he needed to know about the ship's engines, shields and armaments. And in the center of the screen was a large red X, around which danced and weaved a pixelated representation of the enemy ship.

White Seven's target was fast and elusive. Getting that Usurper in his sights would take all his skills, everything he'd learned over the course of many missions.

But he would do it. He would show the President what he was really made of.

And when White Seven scored that fatal, galaxy-saving hit on the enemy, his high-tech interface would reward him with a simulated explosion and a jaunty series of musical notes.

7

Jakk had the exhaust port in his crosshairs. His torpedoes were armed. He was flying faster and harder than he'd ever flown. He was pushing his body to the limit. Sweat poured from his face.

All he had to do was stay alive for a few more seconds...

"Use the Power, Jakk," said Xen's voice.

"Shit, not this again."

"Listen, Jakk. You must trust yourself, not the expensive technology that was designed expressly for moments such as this."

"Really?"

A new text message from Lita, via Violet, appeared on Jakk's screen.

DO NOT OBEY THE VOICE IN YOUR HEAD.

"Now, Jakk! There's no time waste!" Xen said.

Jakk fretted for a microsecond and then he switched off his targeting system.

8

"What the hell is he DOING?!" the Princess shouted. "What the hell are you DOING, Jakk?!"

"Don't worry," came the pilot's voice. "Everything's fine. It's gonna be all right."

Kia pulled out more of her hair.

Eight seconds.

"Okay, Xen," Jakk said. "Here we go."

He put his finger on the trigger.

Brace Pulsar was impressed by the enemy pilot's skill and daring. Too bad they had chosen the wrong side in the fight. Too bad they had to die.

The red X on Brace's display had been chasing the enemy ship futilely. But then the Activist zagged when he should have zigged, and the President was ready for it. The X superimposed itself on the Usurper and began flashing.

"I have you now," Brace said. He fired with both cannons.

CHAPTER FIFTY

1

"Look out, Fakk!" Black Eight cried, as a new ship entered the battle. "I mean Jive! Black Jakk Five!"

2

White Seven was so determined to shoot down the Activist fighter before the President could that he started firing before the big red X on his display covered the target. He was so intent on making the decisive kill that he never knew what hit him. One moment he was trying to lead the enemy ship into the path of his guns; the next he was dust.

Game over.

3

Brace Pulsar never quite figured it out either. As his fingers squeezed the triggers there was a flash of light to the President's left and the next thing he knew his ship was upside down. He clipped the side of the trench and went into a full spin.

At that point the only thing on his mind was survival. And until he could stop spinning the only way to avoid a fiery death was to get out of the narrow corridor before he crashed into it.

With exquisite timing Brace boosted his thrusters just the right amount to climb up out of the trench. His fighter spun away crazily while he wrestled with the controls.

By the time he'd stabilized the ship he was far removed from the battle scene, and that was what spared his life.

Jakk bore down on the target.

He was aware of the two enemy ships closing in on him but there was nothing to be done about them. In seconds he would be a hero or he would be dead. He focused on the exhaust port. His trigger finger twitched.

He sensed a great commotion behind him and wondered briefly if this was the end. But then a pair of familiar voices came over the comm system.

As the Liberators in the trench moved in for the kill, the Aeon Terodakta swooped in with a star at her back. The IP pilots never saw her.

"Waaahoooo!" Don yelled.

Komba rolled his eyes.

The Terodakta blasted one of the enemy fighters and the explosion sent the other one careening into the trench wall. The second fighter escaped the trench and spun away, still out of control.

Don turned on his mic. "You're all clear now, kid. Finish the job and let's get the hell out of here."

"No pressure, farm boy," Komba said.

The displays in the war room couldn't refresh quickly enough to track the chaos in the trench. Kia and company knew something big had happened but they had no idea what. The uncertainty was brief but it felt like an eternity. The room was completely silent.

And then they all heard Don's voice.

"Oh my god," Kia said. She yanked her wounded hand out of Eighty-eight's grasp and wrapped her arms around herself. "Oh my god oh my god oh my god..."

7

Jakk stared at the exhaust port, which was coming up fast. He wiped his face. His finger remained poised on the trigger. He faltered.

He closed his eyes. He envisioned the target.

He saw Kia superimposed on the exhaust port. She was more beautiful than ever, but her expression was ambiguous. Was she beckoning to him or was she pushing him away? What did she want?

"Tell me!" Jakk yelled, and in his confusion and anger he launched two torpedoes.

The ship shuddered as the projectiles burst forth. Jakk trembled and exhaled heavily.

The torpedoes traveled far faster than any fighter could hope to go. They rumbled down the trench and disappeared into the exhaust port.

8

"I did it!" echoed Jakk's voice in the war room.

"Oh my god oh my god oh my gooooodddd," Kia said, her body writhing ecstatically.

Eighty-eight thought it best to turn away.

9

"Great shot, kid!" Don said.

"Now get the frakk outta there," Komba added.

Jakk pulled up hard. He climbed out of the trench and away from the Defense Star.

"Remember, Jakk," Xen's voice said. "The Power will reward you."

"Cool," Jakk said. "But that back there was all me."

"We can discuss it later," the old man replied tersely.

Jakk's fighter fell into formation with the Terodakta and together the ships sped away as fast as they could.

"Where you guys going?" Black Eight said. "Don't you wanna see the thing blow up?"

On the bridge, the computer voice announced, "The destination...has been reached. The destination..."

"This moment will live forever in the annals of the Incorporated Planets," Stobbs declared, pitching his voice to the room. "The scourge of Activism shall soon be no more. The terrorists will attack our peaceful platform. And when they do, we will defend ourselves, and our galaxy, with tremendous vigor!"

A cheer went up among all those assembled.

"And if for some reason they do not attack, then we will defend ourselves pre-emptively. As is our right."

This line wasn't received as well. It might have had something to do with the ominous rumbling coming from somewhere deep within the Defense Star.

A technician ran up to the Secretary with a frightened look on her face. "Sir--" she began.

Stobbs saw her fear, and he felt the floor trembling beneath him.

"Don't tell me they actually hit the exhaust port."

"The blast shields must have malfunctioned," the technician said, barely holding herself together. "We're all gonna d--"

Stobbs turned away. He stared, piercingly, at nothing. A rueful smile distorted his thin lips.

"Very well," he said.

13

The Defense Star imploded.

14

As did the Princess.

15

The platform collapsed like a dying star consumed by its own gravity. And once it was gone there came a brilliant explosion, large enough to be seen throughout the Yoma system. Powerful enough to reverberate across the galaxy, across all of space-time, beyond the boundaries of the known universe!

16

Okay, so not quite that powerful.

But wait till you see the one in *Spacebreaker: Chapter Four: A New Threat: The Special Edition!*

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

1

Brace Pulsar stared hard at the enormous emptiness where once had sat the galaxy's greatest hope for peace and prosperity.

He'd gotten his fighter stabilized. In a few moments he would head to the nearest IP base. For now, though, he had to keep staring. It was the only way to convince himself that the Defense Star was gone.

How could the IP's greatest technological achievement, the largest space vehicle ever built, have been undone by a pair of torpedoes fired into a minor exhaust port?

The President thought about the millions of lives destroyed, the decades of development and construction wasted, the staggering amount of money that had been lost forever.

He thought about these things and his temper flared.

There was going to be accountability, dammit. He would find out what went wrong. He would not let all those deaths be in vain.

There would be meetings, performance reviews, audits across multiple cost centers. The truth would be discovered no how matter long it took and regardless of the expense.

Someone was going to be found negligent. Perhaps a great many someones.

And all of them, the President solemnly vowed, would soon have a lot more time to spend with their families.

2

Black Eight's mismatched eyes (one gray, the other grey) stared dully at nothing. He didn't know where he was or what had happened to him.

He'd been circling high above the enemy...thing, the giant space
whatsit that he and his comrades were supposed to destroy, and then
there had been a burst of blinding light and his ship had been caught in a
shock wave. He'd lost consciousness, and an indeterminate amount of
time had passed, and now he was surrounded by impenetrable darkness.

Was he alive? Possibly. It was too early to say.

Was he breathing? Yes.

Could he wiggle his toes? Yes.

Could he make a fist? Sure.

Could he punch himself in the thigh?

"Augh! Mother COCK did that hurt!"

He could. Except his aim wasn't so great.

Well, that would be the blindness talking.

Cradling his throbbing genitals he tried to make sense of his
situation. He was still in his ship, presumably. Did it have power? Was
the auto-pilot...

"Hey," he said, as an idea descended upon him. "Hey, android, are
you there?"

I am.

"Where are we?"

En route to the base.

"So the battle's over?"

A great victory has been won.

"By us, right?"

Yes.

"Just checking."

"You think they'll be able to fix my eyes?"

No.

"Oh god, really? It's that bad? Tell me what you see!"

A man with his helmet on backward.

"What man? Where?"

It would be good if you stopped talking now.

3

"Are you all right?" Eighty-eight asked, as he helped Kia to her feet.

"Never better," she said rather huskily.

"You don't look it."

The destruction of the Defense Star had driven the Princess to such heights that after reaching the pinnacle she'd collapsed in a triumphant heap on the war room floor. She was covered in dust and sweat, her clothes were disheveled, the bandage on her hand was unraveling, and her hair was a disaster.

"I sure as hell feel it," she said. "This is the greatest day of my life!"

She put her enthusiasm on hold after seeing that General Stallid was troubled. "General, what's wrong? We've just won the biggest victory the cause has ever known."

"Yes, it's wonderful, isn't it, my dear," he said with a grimace.

"What then?"

The general pulled Kia close and spoke softly into her ear. "I don't know what to do now."

"I don't understand."

"I've never won a battle before."

4

In this regard the general was not alone. But although his fellow Activists were also new to the victory thing, they caught on quickly.

In anticipation of the heroes' return every man, woman and android on the base made his or her or its way to the hangar. Jakk's ship and the Terodakta were met by a raucous, cheering throng.

Jakk climbed down from his fighter into the pulsing, beaming crowd. He accepted many handshakes and backslaps. So many of the latter that he started to wonder if the crowd was trying to hurt him.

The mass of revelers spontaneously parted to reveal the Princess. She and Jakk eyed each other, happy and wary both.

The crowd parted again as Don arrived on the scene.

5

Komba stayed the frakk away from all this bullshit. He was still angry that Lita had forced him and Don to join the battle.

First she had sweet-talked the Terodakta's OS into not letting the ship leave the Yoma system. Then Lita had made Komba an offer: Help the Activists destroy the Defense Star and she would forgive his debt to her.

Komba didn't like having his arm twisted like that but he agreed to the terms. And Don was fine with the whole thing...not that he had much of a say in the matter.

So now Komba was debt-free and he should have been happy. But he found himself dwelling on how Lita had beaten him at fuutbal. Nobody beat Komba at fuutbal! That was his motherfrakkin game!

(Most of the time, anyway. At least 51% of the time.)

As soon as all the hoopla died down he was going to play that sneaky android again, and this time he'd win big for sure, he just knew it.

He did *not* have a gambling problem, so go frakk yourself.

People whistled and cheered for the triumvirate of heroes. They kept up the noise-making while the threesome just stood there, excited but uncertain of what came next.

Don looked at Kia. Kia looked at Jakk. Jakk looked at Don.

The latter was the safest pairing so they went with that. The men met each other halfway and hugged.

"I knew you'd come back, Don. I just knew it!"

"Couldn't let you get all the credit, kid. Or claim all the rewards," he added, with a flick of the eyes toward Kia.

"Oh, so I'm a trophy now?" the Princess said. "Well I know a place where you can hide that trophy, Don. Ugh. That did not come out the way I meant it."

"So what if you're a trophy?" Don countered. "It's something of great value that everyone gets for participating. Whoa. That didn't come out the right way either."

"Maybe you two could just...stop," Jakk said. "Like, forever."

They were interrupted by a piercing cry.

"Aiieee!" Eighty-eight said.

He'd just laid optical sensors on poor half-headed Lita. And now that he'd called attention to her, everyone else took a look.

"What's wrong with your face?" cried a voice from the crowd.

"Shut up, Plinkett!" said someone else.

"Oh, this is horrible!" Eighty-eight said, leading his friend down from the ship. "We have to help her! She was never all that much to look at anyway, but there must be something..."

Lita had no speakers through which to respond, but she managed to convey her displeasure.

"Well I'm sorry, honey, but the truth is that your looks are not your best feature. Ow! Why'd you slap me you bitch?"

The onlookers had a good laugh at the androids' bickering.

"Wow," Jakk said. "Those two are so gay."

"Let's hear it for our heroes!" someone yelled.

The crowd roared. Kia and Jakk and Don were hoisted onto its collective shoulders and spirited from the hangar.

Eighty-eight and Lita suffered only minor damage in the trampling.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

1

The benevolent mob carried the heroes into the base's assembly hall. Kia, Jakk and Don were set down on the stage at the front of the room.

Moments later Eighty-eight and Lita entered.

After them came Komba, who staked out a space all the way in the back, by the doors. He was only here in case the Activists started handing out medals. He would not be denied his share of the bling.

He figured a medal would have to be worth something on the open market.

Or at a gaming parlor.

Oh frakk off, would you?

2

"We need a ceremony!" said a voice in the crowd. "To commemorate this day!"

"And a feast!" someone else added. "You can't have a ceremony without a feast!"

"Don't forget the stimulants!" a third voice said.

"Or the narcotics!"

"Or the sex!"

"Yeah," a strident voice piped up, "DON'T FORGET THE FRAKKATHON!"

The crowd reacted boisterously.

"It should be a week-long celebration!" said the first speaker. "With orgies and food and mood-altering substances!"

"And medals for the ceremony!"

"And speeches! Long, boring speeches by people who didn't actually do anything!"

Kia had been trying to calm down the crowd, and now, at last, their uproar subsided a bit.

"All perfectly good ideas," she said. "Let's do it!"

The crowd cheered.

"You have ten minutes."

The room filled with confused murmuring.

"Ten minutes to set it all up?" someone asked incredulously.

"Ten minutes for *everything*," Kia said. "And then we have to evacuate before the IP shows up."

"You can't have a decent frakkathon in ten minutes," complained the strident voice.

"*You* can't," replied someone else.

3

Somehow they pulled it together. It helped that they omitted the feast, the speeches, the orgies and (for the most part) the mood-altering substances.

The crowd arranged itself in rows in front of the stage, with a gap in the middle for the heroes to pass through. Jakk and Don went to the back of the room so they -- and Komba, who was practically smelling himself a medal now -- could make a bit of an entrance when the time came. Kia retreated to her quarters to freshen up.

4

Someone dimmed the lights. A hush settled over the crowd.

Someone else patched their PC into the network and streamed a triumphant fanfare over the room's speakers.

The fanfare was part of a longer piece of well known, much-beloved music which would have been perfect for this occasion. Unfortunately the composer was an ardent champion of intellectual property rights, and no one in the gathering could figure out how to pirate her work in time for the ceremony. The 10-second fanfare was the only part of the piece in the public domain, so it played on an infinite loop.

5

When the music came on Jakk, Don and Komba began walking toward the stage. They faltered when the fanfare repeated itself, but the crowd urged them on.

As they approached the stage the Princess emerged from the wings.

She'd put on her nicest pantsuit. A turban-like accessory had transformed her tragic hair into a minor triumph. She'd even painted her lips. Not to please a man, mind you, but because, every once in a while, on a special occasion, she like to Don it up. Jakk it up. Glam it up. Right.

6

The Princess took her place at center stage.

She had a ceremonial box in her hands. As the heroes climbed the stage steps Kia handed the box to General Stallid. The general attempted to give the box to an aide but Kia quickly corrected him. General Stallid didn't understand, but he complied.

With the heroes in place Kia made a show of removing a medal from the box. She held it up for all to see and then she placed it around Jakk's neck.

Kia removed a second medal, held it up, and then placed it around Don's neck.

No one could see the inscriptions on the medals and that was a mercy. Kia had won them in primary school. One was for starting school, one was for finishing, and one was for the wing her parents had donated.

7

Despite himself, Komba got a little bit emotional while he watched the Princess remove a final medal from the box. Whatever his motives had been for joining the battle, he'd helped save the day. He was a hero...of sorts. It felt weird but not necessarily bad. Maybe it was time to rethink some things. Perhaps he had more in common with the Activists than he would have believed.

And there was the orgy thing to consider. The women in the crowd had seemed even more excited about that prospect than the men. Always a good sign.

As the Princess held up the last medal Komba lowered his great head to receive his reward. He stared at the steps with a hint of a smile on his furry face.

Then he wondered what the hell was taking her so long.

He looked up to see Kia placing the medal around the neck of someone Komba hadn't even known was standing there. A tall man with mismatched eyes.

"You gotta be frakkin kiddin me," Komba said.

8

"Thanks...for what you did," Kia told the tall man, since she had no idea what that might have been. He'd come out of the crowd and fallen into step with the others on their way to the stage, and because he was still in his flight suit she presumed he'd done something. "We honor your contribution."

"Your breast touched my head," Black Eight said.
It had not.

9

The Princess stepped back and gestured for the heroes to turn to the crowd. They did, except for Komba, who stalked off the steps in disgust.

"Stupid-ass motherf--" he muttered, but the rest was lost in a torrent of applause and cheers.

10

People clapped and hooted and whistled. Kia came forward, between Jakk and Don, and took their hands and raised them high.

Black Eight tried to join her. She kicked at him until he went away.

The three of them stood there, basking in the crowd's adulation. The fanfare looped around again.

Kia looked at Don. Don looked at Kia. Jakk looked at Kia and Don.

"Fun times ahead," Eighty-eight said.

The End

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The Hot Dog

A Genius Forged by Death

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